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MUSTANG MERLE'S MINE;

Or, DOLORES DICK AND PARD.

By MAJ. SAM S. SCOTT.



"WE WILL STAND BY THE MINE, JOE, AND WOE TO THE MAN THAT TRIES TO WREST IT FROM US."

Mustang Merle's Mine;

OR,

Dolores Dick and Pard.

BY MAJOR SAM S. SCOTT,
AUTHOR OF "MUSTANG MERLE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

"It still leads westward an' I'm gettin' further from home, but what o' that? I'm no spring chicken any longer an' whenever I start on a trail I like to go to the end, an' here's a trail what interests me more'n a little."

The speaker was mounted on a lithe-limbed horse, which at the time was carrying him across a wide stretch of prairie on the western border of Texas. The full moon which had come out from behind the only cloud visible in the heavens, was shining with dazzling effulgence, showing the grass which the hoofs of the steed crushed in his gallop, and here and there revealing the crocuses and wild verbenas which the same hoofs did not spare.

For some time the man in the saddle had been following a trail which, to him, was very plain but which to a novice would not have been visible at all. There was a path in the grass as if something had been dragged over it and behind a horse somewhere ahead.

The trailer was a lank, dark-featured but good-natured man, as his eyes showed, and every now and then he stroked the heated neck of the horse and essayed some encouraging words.

"We'll probably have something to talk about when we git back to the ranch," continued the rider. "Merle will listen with all ears an' the young 'Pache, if he be thar, won't be far behind him. I want ter see what's been dragged through the grass, for I've the curiosity of the Bundys an' I don't like ter give up ther job with that curiosity half satisfied."

The man kept on until he found himself so far out on the prairie that he could not see the range of hills which he had left some time before, and but for the grass and the flowers it was like being at sea.

At last he drew rein and sprung to the ground. Bending down in front of his steed he looked close at the grass and then rose and let slip a long breath.

"It stopped here," said he, addressing the horse. "Here's whar it rested an' thar's blood on the grass. This shows Old Joe Bundy that what was dragged along here had blood an' that indicates that it was human. Men don't drag animals over the perary at this rate, an' it looks to me as though I'm to find something excitin' at the end o' this trail."

He got up into the saddle once more and the next minute the ride was resumed. The moon shone down upon him careering over the prairie, the horse moving along at a good gait and with his fox-like ears and his keen eyes on the alert.

By-and-by the vast expanse of grass seemed to come to an end and Joe Bundy rose in his stirrups and looked cautiously ahead.

"We're about ter plunge inter the shadows, Grizzle," he said to the horse. "They're right ahead thar, an' it behooves one ter look a little out."

As he spoke he drew a revolver and holding it in readiness to be thrown to the eye in an instant, he moved on once more and in a minute had passed the shadows of the first hills.

He was looking all around when a voice which sent him bolt upright in the saddle was heard and the next instant the old man threw up the six-shooter and compressed his lips.

"It's no use," said the same voice which had called a halt. "I have you at the end of the best weapon in all this country and I want you to drop your own."

"The best one, eh? That's open ter argument," retorted Joe.

"But it won't be argued here unless you want to prove that I am right by falling from your horse food for the vultures."

"Not jest yet, thank ye," grinned Joe, lowering the revolver and for the first time catching a glimpse of the man who had so suddenly broken in upon his thoughts.

A few yards off and near a tree which threw a shadow at the foot of the rise toward which he had ridden, stood a horse and in the saddle the figure of a man.

Joe saw also that the hands of the stranger

gripped a Winchester which covered his own bosom, and he did not hesitate to drop the revolver after this unpleasant discovery.

"Throw it down," said the man, and Joe, gritting his yellow teeth, cast his six-shooter aside.

"Come on now," was the next command, and the old borderer rode forward with a curious grin at the corners of his mouth.

"Pears ter me that figure looks a little familiar," he said to himself. "He carries his head like a gentleman I've met before an' if it's not Dolores Dick, why—"

He was interrupted by the voice of the man before him and the Winchester, suddenly lowered, no longer covered him.

Old Joe had now halted in front of a man whose face was concealed by a dark mask which fitted it rather closely. He was well made, and sat the horse like one born to the saddle. His leggings were fringed from knee to ankles and there his pretty moccasins began, for, though a white, as Joe had decided, he did not wear boots and there were no spurs at his heels.

"Which way?" said the hidden face, eying the man he had halted with deep curiosity.

"That depends," answered Joe, casting a hasty look at the ground as if he were looking for the object which had bent the grass down for miles behind him.

"You were tracking something. Are you out for that young master of yours?"

The old man started at the question.

"For my master?" he exclaimed. "Do I look like a man who needs a master? Why, I've passed the middle milestone of a man's life an'—"

"But you have a master all the same. I know you," interrupted the stranger. "You are serving him now, an' prying into other people's business."

"That might be an opinion not borne out by the facts," said Joe. "I generally tend to my own affairs an' sometimes I ride out on my own hook an' look 'round."

"To-night, however, you have been tracking me."

"Why should Joseph Bundy track you, I'd like to know?"

A laugh stirred the folds of the mask and the eyes behind it seemed to get a sudden gleam of merriment.

"You ought to have remained at the ranch or in the mine which your boy master is working for all there is in it. He is getting rich on what really is not his, and my advice to him is that he should keep his eyes open, for riches take wings nowadays and fly away."

"I've seen 'em do that myself," averred Joe.

"Does the mine pay as much as ever?" inquired the masked man.

"I guess so."

"You ought to know since you are general overseer, and not an ounce is taken out without your knowledge."

"You seem to know."

"Why shouldn't I?" chuckled the stranger.

A moment's silence ensued and Joe Bundy wondered what would be the next question, when he spied something he had not seen before beyond the spot occupied by the black horse.

This object was dark and lay on the ground in the shadow of a mesquite tree. It was long and strangely human in shape and Joe thought he could detect a rope which led from the object toward the horse he was facing. Was this the thing he had trailed through the grass and under the moon? Had he found the object he had tracked for miles and was it a human body—the victim of border vengeance and the enemy of the man who had stopped him?

"You will go back," suddenly said the mask. "I hold the fort here, and to show you that I am not thirsting for any man's blood, I give you liberty to return to your master."

But Old Joe did not move. He was looking at the thing he had discovered and was not thinking of the man in the saddle. He had now no doubt that he had come up with the murderer and his victim. But he was not startled. It was a rough region and such crimes were numerous there. He recalled many of them while he looked at what he had discovered; he thought how Mesquite Ranch, the place he called home, had been destroyed by a border desperado named Captain Cussed, or Red Jacket, and of the work and blood it took to pay the villain for his last raid; he remembered, too, his own narrow escapes during that campaign, and how he and his young friend and companion, Mustang Merle, the owner of the ranch, had fought side by side to bring about the result which secured a year of peace.

"You will go back, I say," said the man before him with more sternness than ever. "You have followed me far enough to-night. I don't like a wolf at my heels. Take my regards to Mustang Merle and tell him that he should get all out of his mine before it is claimed by one whose rights to it he dare not dispute."

"What's that?" cried Joe, leaning forward. "That mine belongs to the boy rancher. In the first place, it is on his land and secondly, he's able ter take care of it."

"I'm glad to hear that," was the answer. "Able to take care of it, eh? Won't he surrender it to the rightful owner?"

"He is that person, I say."

"He is not! There lives a person who holds a deed for that very mine."

"Why, it had been lost for years when we accidentally came across it. It was hunted by every Tom, Dick an' Harry of the border, and was understood ter belong ter the one what found it."

"Go back and wait; that is what you are asked to do," came the retort.

Once more the deadly Winchester, which had been lowered, came up again and looked sullenly into the homely face of Joe Bundy. The movement was accompanied by a look from the dark eyes behind the mask which emphasized the order and he took up the reins.

"I want ter say right here that Mustang Merle's Mine will be defended ter the bitter end," cried Joe.

A short laugh followed the sentence, but the voice which came after it was terribly stern.

"Then woe to every one of you! You can't fight a cyclone! You are to lose the bonanza you have worked and the boy fool called Mustang Merle is to reap, within the next few hours, the whirlwind he has sowed. I have warned you, and I want no thanks for it. Go back and prepare for the storm. Captain Cussed is dead, but Mesquite has a sterner enemy than he!"

CHAPTER II.

WRITTEN ON STONE.

THE man in mask eyed Joe Bundy and seemed to smile if the eyes said anything at all.

"Take your revolver with you, Joseph; you may need it soon," said he, and the old man, leaning from the saddle, swept the ground with his bronzed hand and recovered the weapon.

Once more he looked at the stranger and at the object on the grass near by. It lay there like a corpse and he thought he could see a mangled face looking up at the stars and the vaulted heavens, but he had no time for scrutiny.

"So Merle's ter lose his mine, is he?" the old man repeated.

"I have warned you. Go home and prepare for the worst."

"Then you will listen ter Joe Bundy for a moment, I guess," and Joe stood erect in his stirrups and faced the one before him. "You will hear the defiance of Mesquite from my lips for I represent it here. The storm may come whenever it likes. It may strike when and whar it pleases, but it will find us prepared. We haven't forgotten our tussle with Cap'n Cussed; that is history and you must have read it before to-night. We will stand by the mine which belongs to the young master. It is on his land an' woe to the man or men who attempts to deprive him of it!"

The uplifted hand of the old borderer fell and the masked man answered:

"Go back and defend what you hold. I have given you fair warning. The person who will come for the mine will have it or there will be no claimants at the end of the game. Good-night, Joseph!" and the speaker turned and rode off; but Joe noticed that the singular object on the ground did not move.

The old man wheeled and rode back. He looked once over his shoulder and saw the man he had faced riding over the trail ahead as if he had encountered no one and the next instant he vanished and was gone.

Bundy pursued his way back toward the ranch lying beyond the prairie he had ridden over, and through the grass through which he had tracked the mystery of the night. He said nothing to his steed but was moody and silent, and not until he had crossed the open and drawn rein among a number of stables did he open his mouth.

"Take the horse, Chip," he said to the figure which sprung forward for that very purpose, and then he walked up an avenue of cedars and his boots sounded heavily on a porch shaded by a lot of sweet-scented vines.

A moment later he opened a door and appeared suddenly to a young person who looked

up at sound of the latch and threw down a book.

"Back, are you, Joe?" cried this person who was a boy of seventeen or thereabouts with a handsome face, a good figure and deep expressive eyes. "You have been on the prairie. The dew is still on your boots, and you bring back the scent of the wild blossoms there."

"I've been across Long Tom Perary."

"That's a long ride, Joe."

"Yes, but I had something to take me across. I struck a trail an' thought I would see what thar was in it. Well, I found out. I had the pleasure o' lookin' inter the muzzle of a Winchester."

Mustang Merle, the owner of the ranch, started with a smile which he could not keep back despite the gravity of the occasion.

"It's a Gospel fact. I war ridin' along lookin' at the ground, for I had follered something strange across the perary, when all at once I war requested ter throw up my hands an' thar sat in front of Grizzle an' I a masked pard with a Winchester which looked uncommon sour."

"A masked man, Joe?"

The boy was thoroughly interested now.

"A masked pard, and the half-careless way in which he handled the gun made me sort o' nervous. We passed a few words and then I got orders ter go back."

"Tell me everything; we have the night before us, Joe," said Merle, and the old man proceeded and related his adventure, skipping nothing, not even the minutest detail.

"So we are to fight for our own, are we?" said Merle, his teeth meeting firmly behind the last words. "So we are to be deprived of the bonanza? Joe, there can be no heir to a mine like ours. We found it and it was lost for years."

"Didn't I tell him so?" cried the borderer.

"But, didn't he say that ag'in' the claimant who was to come we could not stand?"

"Fish!" exclaimed Mustang Merle, springing up and beginning to pace the room, watched by the old man, who had crossed his long legs, one of which he held in his big hands.

"Joe, this means something," suddenly remarked Merle, stopping in front of his friend.

"It means something far more serious than the threat which we once received from Captain Cussed, the captain of the Red Jacket Braves. We are to meet a new enemy, and I am confident that you have seen him."

"The masked man, eh?"

"Yes. He may not be the claimant, but he will conduct the campaign for that person. We must prepare to meet the storm."

"Then, you look for one?"

"I do."

"But the object what beat the grass down?—what do you think of it?"

"One of the masked man's victims."

"That's my opinion, exactly. I saw the outlines of a human body on the ground. It was dragged at the heels of his horse, and that war what I follered across the perary."

"Of course."

"But the heir to the mine?—that's what puzzles me."

Mustang Merle did not speak for a moment, and then he came closer to Old Joe, looking down into his face until their eyes seemed to touch.

"You remember the inscription on the wall in the big chamber of the old mine?" said he.

"Jehosaphat, yes!" cried the old borderer. "It went through me like a knife the first time I saw it. Do you think that person has come?"

"No, I do not. That inscription was made perhaps a century ago—even before an American was in this country. The hand that cut it in the stone crumbled to dust, and has been forgotten for generations."

"But the masked man must know of the inscription," said Joe, perplexed, as his countenance showed.

"It would seem so; but how did he possess himself of it?"

"That's the puzzle. Let's go down to the mine an' take a squint at the writin'."

Mustang Merle made no reply, but his look was answer enough, and soon the twain were walking from the ranch-house over a beaten path, which led them to a deep ravine, where they became lost to the descending moon.

It was not long before their figures were seen in the depths of Mustang Merle's mine, and they stood revealed by the torches they carried. The young rancher was ahead, and he led Joe down a narrow corridor, with not a word passing between them.

On every side were evidences that the mine was being worked, and that it was a rich one.

There were piles of new ore, and in one chamber stood several huge crushers.

Merle and Joe kept on until they entered a vast chamber, the walls of which seemed to lose themselves in the darkness overhead, and the boy approached one of them with his torch, smiling as he looked back at his friend.

"Here it is, Joe," called out Merle. "Here is the sentence which has been here for ages," and he held his light close to the stone while Joe leaned forward and seemed to read.

The torchlight falling on the wall, which was cold and gray, revealed the letters which had stood there for years, and while he looked, Merle's lips appeared to speak them, thus:

"When the heir of Jose Santado comes for his own, he will bear on his arm the sign of his house, which is a coiled serpent and a broken arrow."

"Woe to him who shall usurp this mine!"

"JOSE, THE DEAF."

Such was the inscription on the wall under ground. It meant, beyond cavil, that the mine at one time was the property of "Jose, the Deaf," that some time after his death his heir should come to claim it, and that he would bear on his arm the sign of the house of Santado—a snake and an arrow, which sign was carved in the stone above the words we have just written.

Hundreds of times had Merle and Joe seen this sentence on the wall. It had become familiar to them, and they had discussed it as often, wondering what had become of the heir, and how long he had been gathered to his fathers.

But now they were threatened with the appearance of an heir; after a century the scion of the house of Santado was to come and take the mine!

No, he should not have it. It was sheer nonsense to think that a true heir existed. The mine was Merle's; it stood on his ground, and he would defend it to the bitter end. As well might they ask for the ranch itself.

"I don't care what the masked desperado said to you," cried the boy rancher, straightening before the wall and pointing at the inscription. "We will stand by the mine, Joe, and woe to the man who tries to wrest it from us. I want no quarrel with any living person, but I won't be robbed with impunity. The heir of Jose Santado, if he had one when that was written, died long ago, and the desperate scheme which seems to have been hatched out against Mesquite and its bonanza shall be met at every step."

"An' you kin call on Old Joe Bundy for all he has in the box," was the prompt response. "The face behind that mask will look very old before it laughs over the gold of Jose Santado's mine."

Once more Merle and Joe were moving back toward the opening, and in a little while they entered the ranch-house, a frown on the old borderer's leathery face and a flash of defiance in the boy rancher's eye.

CHAPTER III.

THE MARKED ARM.

WHILE the foregoing scene was taking place in the depths of Mustang Merle's mine, another which demands our attention was occurring in another part of the country.

"Well, I'm back, as you see," exclaimed a man, springing from a deep saddle and confronting another who stood with his back to a fire which burned at the edge of a belt of timber near which ran a small stream that far away united its clear waters with those of the Rio Tagus.

"So I see," was the reply. "What did you discover—anything?"

The answer to these queries was a laugh, and the first speaker drew nearer and touched the questioner's arm.

"Come and see," said he, and he led the man to the edge of the little camp where some trees stood in a group, and pointing at something on the ground, drew back a little and looked at him.

"Heavens! where did you find this man?" cried the other, suddenly, falling back from the object over which he had stooped.

"Look at him closely. Have you ever seen him before?"

Again the anxious one bent over the form on the ground and examined the mutilated face, for it was the body of a man, but the rough usage to which it had been subjected had nearly robbed it of human semblance.

"It looks like Diaz," said the person, looking up.

"It is the traitor. That man in life was Diaz, the rebel. I found him on the way to the ranch and I netted him. Ha! it was well done, if I do say it myself. I dragged him over the prairie at my horse's heels, but I had a trailer myself."

"You? Some one on your track, do you say?"

"Yes. I was trailed across Long Tom, and by a cool but curious specimen of humanity, still a bad dog in a fight."

"Name him!" cried the other. "Who was at your heels?"

"It was that long galoot who lives on the ranch—the man who once hunted for the lost mine, but who, having found it, surrendered his share to the boy, and who now is the young rancher's slave."

"Ah, you mean Joe Bundy?"

"That is the man."

"And why isn't he here with Diaz?"

"Because I sent him back home with a message to his young master. I told him that the time for the appearance of the heir of Jose Santado had come, and leaving him to carry the word to the teeth of Merle, I came away."

"Well, I don't know but that you did right," was the reply. "I want the boy to know that he is to lose his mine—that, as the heir of Jose Santado, I intend to claim the bonanza and get it, cost what it may."

The speaker was a man of fifty. He was not very tall nor heavily built, but there was strength and much of it in his make-up, and determination looked out of his eyes. He was dark of skin like a Mexican, but his voice was clear and his hands were as soft as a woman's, though unusually long.

The other had thrown aside the mask which had prevented Joe Bundy from seeing his face, and he stood revealed as a very Apollo of the border, with an elegant figure, a handsome face, and long black hair to round-off the picture. He was almost fantastically dressed, and in the red sash which he wore around his waist were stuck two silver-mounted revolvers.

"When shall we go?" impatiently asked the little man with eagerness cropping out with every syllable.

"Before long," was the reply. "We must bury this man first and then plan our campaign fully. See where I caught him with the loop. He was riding along never dreaming that Dolores Dick was near when presto! the noose dropped over his head and he fell from the saddle in a jiffy. There was no struggle, for almost as quick as he struck the ground he was moving over it at my steed's heels; but he gave me one look that told much."

"He knew you?"

"Yes, and I shouted to him that the traitor's game was up, and that was all he heard."

"Captain Dick, more than one half of my mine shall belong to you," exclaimed the man crouched on the ground. "You have removed a crawling serpent from my path and I will never forget it."

"Don't mention it, Rubio. I have a grudge of my own against the boy owner of the ranch and I reckon he hasn't forgotten Captain Red Jacket's old lieutenant, Dolores Dick."

The twain went back to the fire and the dead man was left under the trees.

"Rubio, you are pretty young to be Jose Santado's heir," said Dick with a grin.

"But I am that person. Look here!"

The speaker tore off his jacket and threw it upon the ground. Then he rolled up his sleeves exposing a well-muscled arm, and Dick, leaning nearer, saw thereon in tattoo a coiled serpent surmounted by a broken arrow.

"Who will dispute that proof?" cried the little man, looking up into his companion's face. "I am Rubio, the owner of the mine claimed by Mustang Merle. This arm attests my claim. It is the same device that stands in the depths of the mine."

The eyes of the speaker glittered like a serpent's while he talked, and Dolores Dick, falling back, looked at him with a smile.

"They don't think of the tattoo at the ranch," said he.

"Of course not. They think of nothing of the kind, but it is here all the same. I am the heir to the bonanza. Woe to the man who says I am not Rubio."

Dolores Dick walked to his own horse, and the owner of the marked arm went back to the fire at which he stopped and looked into it with a stare.

"I want to begin the fight," he muttered. "I want to get rich once more. I have the mark that will enrich me. I hold the key to the finest mine in this country; but it is defended."

"They will fight for it," he went on, watched by Dolores Dick over whose face a smile would pass every now and then. "They will not give it up without a desperate struggle. Let me see. We will have to meet the boy, the old borderer, Joe Bundy, and last but not least, the young

Indian who comes to the ranch whenever there is trouble brewing. Why couldn't we watch for the red Greaser and net him before he comes? He knows that I am in the country. I saw him looking at me that last time I was in the 'Pache village and he has the eye of the eagle. He may have seen me show my arm to White Rob, the half-breed there. If he did he will suspect. That Indian must be watched. He will come over his old path to the ranch."

A moment later Rubio sprung away and appeared suddenly to the man who had been watching him so covertly.

"You lassoed a white man, now we must catch the red game!" he cried, laying his hand on Dolores Dick's arm.

"What do you mean?"

"The young Indian must not reach the boy rancher. Red Hawk, the friend he had when he confronted you and your old captain, must not gain the ranch."

"Rubio, you see through a stone wall without a bit of trouble," grinned Dick. "You are right; this young red-skin must not reach the ranch at this time, and he will be pretty sure to be on the old trail, if not there already."

"We must catch him!"

"Since you have proposed this, don't you think you are the proper person to do the catching?"

"I have trapped the animal called man before. I can catch this young ferret of the 'Pache nation."

"With the lasso?"

"Leave the setting of the trap to me!"

"Then yonder lies the trail!" cried Dick, pointing toward the north. "If the Indian friend of Mesquite is coming he will take the old path. But be careful. You know your game and you know, too, that if he wins the play the mine passes forever from the grasp of the heir of Jose Santado."

"I remember," exclaimed Rubio, drawing back and lifting the marked arm. "Hear me, Dolores Dick. You shall see me come back with the scalp of the young red fox at my belt. Then we will swoop down upon Mesquite in our peculiar manner, and not all of them shall withstand the whirlwind of the border. Who would not strike for the old mine of long dead Jose? The day is near at hand when I shall bear my right arm in its golden heart and you shall look upon the two signs—the one in stone, and the one on my arm. Rubio has come for Mustang Merle's bonanza!"

"Then, you must not let that Indian outwit you," laughed Dolores Dick as he turned away.

"I am fifty if a day. Don't call me a boy," was the flashed response, and Rubio struck the ground with his heel.

CHAPTER IV.

A BITER BITTEN.

THE little fire near the bank of the stream was still throwing its sparks heavenward when the man called Rubio rode from the camp leaving Dolores Dick alone with the victim of his night hunt. The pretender was well mounted and armed, and rode along the stream for some distance when he took off in a northern direction and soon found himself on the open prairie.

He now gave his steed the spur and galloped rapidly for more than an hour, looking ahead with his keen eyes and every now and then muttering to himself.

He did not draw rein until he had crossed the open and reached a line of hills similar to those which he had left behind, and there he dismounted and examined the ground.

"The old trail is here, but no one has passed along for several days," said he, rising. "If the young Indian is on the route he has not reached this pass and I am in time."

Rubio now removed his horse to a secluded spot where the best eyes in the land could not have found him, and then crept back to the place where he had dismounted.

There he made himself comfortable among the shadows with his back to a huge rock and, with a Winchester in his hand, waited for the person for whom he had made the ambush.

This man, Rubio, was not unknown in the Southwest. He was a desperado whose life had been one of daring deeds of recklessness from childhood. He was half-Mexican, and there was Indian blood in his veins, and by some he was known as the Half Comanche. How he became acquainted with Dolores Dick is not to the purpose of our story, but there were few men of Dick's make-up whom he did not know, and when he showed the handsome young outlaw the tattoo on his arm and proclaimed himself the true heir of the mine, though Dolores Dick knew that he was a base impostor, he resolved

to make common cause with the rascal, for he, too, had a grudge against Mustang Merle, and wanted a little assistance in carrying it out.

Beyond the Tagus at all times were to be found a lot of men who terrorized the ranches, and who levied tribute on all that would suffer the indignity. Now and then some courageous rancher would rebel against them and drive them off, but they would return to the work and, in the end, usually succeed.

The greatest of the tribute takers, Captain Cussed, had met his fate before the rifles of the men of Mesquite Ranch, and the most of his men had followed him. Dolores Dick, outlawed by the band for permitting Mustang Merle to escape from the outlaw captain, had operated on his own hook, though he had no band at his back. Now and then he would stand up some rich rancher on the prairie or among the hills and get enough to enable him to go back to the gaming dens of the border and play until he was forced to return to the trail.

Dolores was a fit companion for the man called Rubio. If they could secure the rich mine which Mustang Merle was working, their fortunes would be made, and they would not have to resort to the desperate needs of holding people up on the trails.

But let us return to the man left under the stars watching for the person whom he expected from the Apache country.

Several hours passed over Rubio's head, but he did not become impatient. He knew that one must exercise patience when he waits for an Indian, and for hours he had moved not, but with all the senses on the alert he kept his place and fingered the light trigger of the deadly Winchester.

At last, there came from the north a sound that sent a thrill to the watcher's heart.

It told him that a horse was coming toward his ambush and he leaned from his rock and listened.

"He is coming at last!" said Rubio. "The red fox of the 'Paches is riding into the snare and I haven't waited for nothing. Ah, now I will deprive Mustang Merle of his best ally, for, with the young Indian against us, success would not be certain."

Nearer and nearer came the horse, his hoofs sending forth sounds which to the keen ears of Rubio told him how near he was.

Now the Half Comanche did not move, but looked like a part of the rock itself. He looked along the trail and tried to catch the object which he knew would soon rise into view, showing him that he had caught the young hawk of the Apaches.

There was no sign of mercy in the eyes of the crouching man. They never showed light of that kind, and he was not the one to spare the life of an Indian.

"He is here!" cried Rubio as something dark came into view above the horizon stars at the end of the pass. "Red Hawk, the 'Pache, is in the trap."

The horse and his rider thus discovered came on and were soon in the center of the pass. If the rider suspected danger he did not show it, and a grim smile overspread the croucher's face while he watched him come forward.

In a little while the figures of horse and Indian were opposite the rock, still there was no movement on Rubio's part.

He let them pass and watched them as they went by.

"There's light enough for me," grinned the man. "I can see like an owl in the dark."

The next moment the horse was some little distance beyond the rock and then the hands of the crouching rascal moved. They came up, gripping the rifle, his dark eyes meantime fastened on the object of his hunt, and the next instant the head of the Indian was covered.

All at once there was a loud report and the horse on the trail seemed to spring into the air and something human in shape fell forward.

"That's the first shot for the mine," came from between the desperado's teeth. "That's the opening gun of war."

He had barely spoken when the horse ahead bounded on and the following second was flying over the prairie which lay ahead.

Rubio looked on like a person suddenly stunned.

"Heavens, what if I did not finish him?" he cried. "What if the horse carries him to Mesquite after all? I don't want that. It might spoil the game we are playing."

He ran to his own steed in the adjacent shadows and in a trice was riding after the horse which he could barely see ahead.

All this had not taken up more than three seconds. The Half Comanche was a good rider,

and his steed, urged to his topmost speed, seemed to fly over the grass.

On, on went Rubio after his victim, and on, too, went the horse before his own. It was a race between two well-matched animals for the Apaches ride none but the best, and this one had cause for putting his best feet foremost. If he did not carry his young master to Mesquite, woe to the mine and its young owner.

Rubio rode as he had never ridden before after an enemy. His horse seemed to strain every nerve, and he was carried over the level ground at a rate which seemed to leave even the wind behind. Now and then he would lose sight of the horse ahead, but he would see it again, and at last he saw that an apparently inanimate body was hanging to the dark mane.

"We must overtake him!" cried Rubio, striking his steed. "We must leave this young Indian to wait here on the prairie till the last trump is blown. I have sworn to Dick to show him the scalp of Red Hawk, and I can't go back without it."

Some time passed before Rubio could say that he was really gaining on his antagonist. He saw at last that the distance between them was lessening, and that if he could keep up a while longer he would come alongside of the horse he was so eager to overtake.

Every nerve was strained now. Rubio leaned forward with his right hand ready to clutch and jerk his victim from his steed, and he had put up the rifle, with this intention foremost in his brain.

He came up with the quarry at last. He found himself after a long ride side by side with the horse of his victim; he saw the body of its rider hanging to the side of the animal, with his dark-red hands buried in the mane.

A wild cry of joy pealed from the renegade's throat. He had but to reach out and clutch his prey.

But all of a sudden the horse he had followed lurched toward him and his own steed went backward, losing his foothold and fell heavily to the ground.

"Jehu!" cried the dismounted man when he found himself under his struggling steed. "That horse is as tricky as his red master. He did that on purpose, and knocked me out of the saddle and I believe broke a leg for me, besides."

Rubio got his steed upon his feet as soon as possible and, looking across the prairie saw nothing of the horse he had been following.

He felt faint and sick.

Near by stood his steed looking at him as if to apologize for what it could not help, and Rubio, biting his lip, staggered forward and tried to crawl back into the saddle. He could not do this until he had made several attempts, but when he was there he had to shut his eyes and groan for the pain which had taken possession of his limbs.

"A thousand curses on the horse!" he growled. "I had my hand on the Indian's arm and would have pulled him off in another second. I would have won the game if that horse had not turned on me; but I have lost him now."

Ten minutes later Rubio was riding back to camp. He felt that he was badly injured; one boot was full of blood, and he could not move his right leg. Thus, between groans and oaths, he went rapidly over the ground, and at last rode into camp. As he came down over the hills that bordered the stream, with the first streaks of day in the east, he beheld a man standing where he had parted with Dolores Dick.

A smile passed over Dick's face when he caught sight of Rubio.

"I found the young 'Pache and finished him on the prairie, but his horse avenged the shot," said Rubio, and the next instant in trying to dismount he dropped to the ground with a yell of pain, and Dolores Dick, smiling still, bent over him and lifted him up.

"You're only winged a little," said the handsome desperado. "Winged birds generally get well."

Rubio answered with another groan.

CHAPTER V.

THE AMBUSHED APACHE.

THE morning glow had not yet come when a horse covered with foam came down over the hills that surrounded Mesquite Ranch and halted in front of the house.

It was seen by a man who ran from the stables revolver in hand and who stopped near the animal, for something had fallen from the saddle and lay on the ground.

"Bless me if it ain't Red Hawk, the 'Pache!" cried this man, and in a moment the whole house seemed awake.

Red Hawk had come back to Mesquite, but

near death, as all thought, when they saw the bleeding head and noticed the staring eyes and the gasps for breath.

The young Indian was carried into the house and laid on the cot in Mustang Merle's chamber.

In a short time he came out of the deathly stupor and the first person to be noticed by his wandering eyes was the lank figure of Old Joe Bundy.

"You're wu'th a dozen dead men, Red Hawk," said Joe. "I guess some p'izen rascal laid for you somewhar on the trail an' attempted ter deprive us of an ally."

The Indian smiled and nodded; but when he had been brought out of the faint and was able to have his wound dressed, he told all he knew about the ambush, which was not much, for with the shot darkness had come.

"Red Hawk has come to tell the young master that the Man with the Marked Arm is on the war-path," said he.

"The Man with the Marked Arm?" echoed Mustang Merle.

"The Half Comanche who runs with the outlaw who escaped when we finished Captain Cussed and his band."

Joe Bundy and Mustang Merle instantly exchanged hasty glances.

"I told you he looked like Dolores Dick," said Old Joe.

"The Man with the Marked Arm has been to the Apache's village and Red Hawk has watched him. He showed his arm to White Rob and did not know that Red Hawk was looking on."

"How is that arm marked?" asked Merle.

"It has on the skin a coiled serpent and a broken arrow."

"That's Jose Santado's pretended heir!" cried Joe. "We know the rascal at last!"

"He talked about the mine and said that it belonged to the man whose arm was marked as his is," continued the Indian. "He is coming to claim his own, so he told White Rob, and I came to help you against him and his friend."

"But who shot you?"

"Who would want to keep Red Hawk from you?" queried the Indian.

"Why, the Man with the Marked Arm," said Merle. "You will be ready to help us meet him when he comes for what he shall not have. The bullet tore a furrow along your skull, but did not disable you. The man in ambush should have taken you in front."

The eyes of the young Indian flashed and his hands shut hard.

"Red Hawk is worth all the dead of his nation," he said. "He will live to find the man who shot him and will pay him back."

"Of course you will, and if you need any assistance in the debt-paying business jest call on Joe Bundy. No charge for services, an' all work executed with promptness and dispatch."

The advancing day found Red Hawk ready to walk out with his head bandaged, and he found his way to the mine, where he stood in one of the chambers and watched the miners at work.

He was not alone. A beautiful young girl had accompanied him to the mine and stood with him, looking every now and then into his dark but handsome face. Her own skin was dark, but not like that of the young Indian's. She was the child of a man who had died on the ranch six months before—a man who had been a rover nearly all his life, and who in dying had left his off-spring, Neva, to the kind care of Mustang Merle and his people.

Neva was seventeen, with a graceful figure, a bewitching face and bright eyes which seemed to charm all upon whom they were turned. She had become the ranch's favorite, and there was not a man there from Joe Bundy down to Chip, the stable-guard, who would not have sacrificed his life in her cause.

Red Hawk and Neva were not particularly noticed by the miners, and they passed on into another chamber and halted in front of one of its walls.

"Ah, here it is, Red Hawk," cried the girl, showing the young Indian some letters in the stone which their light had revealed. "This is the old inscription which has been here for so many years."

The Indian bent forward and looked at the carving, then passed his red hand over it and turned to the girl with a smile.

"The snake and the arrow are here just as they appear on Rubio's arm," said he.

"But he is not the owner of the mine, Red Hawk?"

"That white rascal? No," cried the Indian. "He has lied so often that no one believes him, and when he thinks he can get possession of Merle's mine he deceives himself."

"But he has the handsome Dolores Dick to aid him?"

"But they are not strong enough to wrest it from us."

"They have no help, Joe says."

"Let not the young girl of the ranch think thus," was the quick response. "Along the border are hundreds of pale-faces who, for this mine or a share of it, would unite with Dick and Rubio and swoop down upon it like a flock of eagles. They are ready to do anything that promises to give them more money for the gaming tables, but Dick and Rubio will try their own hands first. They are cunning and know all the trails of this region."

"But we won't let them succeed, Red Hawk," cried the girl. "We will beat them back and they shall not touch an ounce of Mustang Merle's gold."

Red Hawk smiled and looked down into the clear eyes of his companion.

"Who placed the marks on Rubio's arm?" asked Neva.

"Ah, who, White Rose?" was the quick reply.

"Was it done long ago?"

"That is a question for Rubio himself, and he is not here to answer. He may come soon enough and then we may know more."

"But tell me something about him. You have heard of him before to-day."

For a moment the young Indian was silent, but when he spoke again, his voice seemed to have a different sound.

"Rubio may be as old as these hills," said he, solemnly. "He is a strange man. He knows what took place in this country a long time ago, before the Indians were here. He can tell stories about the lost mines which thrill all who hear them, and they bow to Rubio's wisdom. He knows where the hidden trails are, how the Spaniards worked the lost mines, and how the people who dwelt in this country before a white man saw it, killed the deer and chased the buffalo."

"But you call him a Comanche."

"He calls himself a half-breed, yet he says that he is older than the trees on the highlands."

Neva looked at Red Hawk a little while as if she did not believe what he had said, but presently her hand stole up softly and touched his naked arm.

"We are all alone Red Hawk," said she, lowering her voice. "No one hears us here. What do you really think of the man who carries the serpent and the arrow on his arm?"

The young Indian for a moment avoided the girl's gaze, but slowly his eye came back to her anxious face.

"There is more than common blood in Rubio's veins," he said at last. "This man has not the look of his fellow-creatures, for Red Hawk has watched him when he thought no one was near. He has seen him steal from camp and talk to the Great Spirit in the sky."

The girl seemed to draw back in awe.

"Rubio is more than man," continued the young Indian. "He is something more than he with whom he rides—the outlaw of the border. Rubio lived years and years ago; he knows all that he talks about. Neva, child, you must not tell Merle what Red Hawk has said."

"I will not," said the fair girl. "I will say nothing to any of them, Red Hawk. And this is the man who claims the mine; this is the person who says to Merle: 'You must give up your bonanza; it is mine.'"

The Indian nodded.

"Red Hawk, are you going to resist this person if you believe that he is more than man?" she asked.

"Red Hawk is Mustang Merle's brother," was the prompt answer. "He stands between Merle and all dangers that threaten. It is Red Hawk's duty to defend the mine even against the Man with the Marked Arm."

The Indian's eye wandered to the writing on the stone, and for a moment Neva saw him study it in silence. She drew back a step and watched him.

"The hand that wrote on the stone wrote also on Rubio's arm," said Red Hawk at last.

"But that was placed on the stone years and years ago. It was written by Jose Santado, the first owner of this mine."

"Yes."

"Why, he has crumbled to dust, and is forgotten."

"True, White Rose; but his heir has come."

The superstition of the Indian amused and at the same time frightened Neva, the wif. It could not be, yet she felt a strange thrill at her heart, and fell back from Red Hawk, regarding him in the light of a young prophet.

"Let us go back," said she, and as Red Hawk turned away something dropped from above.

It fell in front of them, and the girl stopped with a short cry, but the Indian stooped and picked it up.

"It is a document of some kind," she cried, with staring eyes. "It has lain somewhere for ages. See how dusty it is, and almost ready to fall to pieces. We must take it as it is to Merle."

"It is a message from Jose Santado," said Red Hawk. "He has sent Mustang Merle a letter about the mine," and Neva, trembling and white-faced, followed Red Hawk without a murmur.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TREASURE OF THE DEAD.

CAREFULLY handled was the old document which the young Apache bore to Mustang Merle, who was found at the house. When it was laid upon the boy rancher's table it fell apart, and threatened to become dust there and then, but some careful work enabled the beholders to unwrap it, and Merle declared that it was written in Spanish, a language with which he was familiar.

"I must go over this carefully," said the young rancher to Red Hawk, and the old thing was left with Merle while the Indian went out, and Joe Bundy stole into the room.

The two put their heads together over the strange find, and Merle, after some study of its almost faded lines, uttered an exclamation which startled his friend.

"There is another mine somewhere in this neighborhood, Joe. Here is the map of the spot, and the directions for finding it."

"It seems ter me that we have all we want ter handle now," was the reply. "But who wrote that old document?"

"Jose Santado; here is his name at the bottom of it. It was penned nearly one hundred years ago, and says that the body of Jose is in the mine we are now working."

"That accounts for the ghost, then."

"The ghost?" echoed Merle.

"I never told you, did I? Well, I did not like ter say anything about it because it would look foolish for a man of my years talkin' of spooks an' sich things, but since that paper says that the bones of the bonanza's first owner ar' somewhar in the mine, I feel that I might have seen correctly after all."

"When did you see anything strange in the mine?"

"It was last summer. I was comin' through the big chamber all alone when I became certain that I wasn't the only person thar. All was dark, for I know the old mine at all times, an' when I stopped and listened I heard a foot-step an' then a light danced before me. I could make out the figure of a man, tall and strange looking, and he seemed ter move through the air without touching the ground. My hair, what little I have—an' the Bundy's never have much—stood on end an' I follered the thing jest because I couldn't help it. It led me on an' on until it stopped at a wall an' thar I saw it pass its hand over the stone jest like like a livin' person would do."

"After awhile it moved forward once more, but I couldn't foller any longer. I had seen enough an' my knees war knockin' ag'in each other, but I kept my eyes open an' saw the thing vanish in the depths of the mine. When I went to whar I had seen it near the wall I found that it had touched the letters that ar' cut in the stone, just as if Jose Santado had come back ter see that they were still thar."

While Old Joe talked Mustang Merle watched him, saying nothing, but with an incredulous smile at the corners of his mouth.

"Is that all you saw, Joe?" he asked.

"Not quite. I saw the ghost bare its arm at the wall an' look at somethin' on it jest as if thar was a tattoo thar like the one on the arm of the man called Rubio."

"That is strange," said Merle. "You saw this distinctly, did you, Joe?"

"Yes; as plainly as I see you now."

Merle went back to the old document before him and after watching him for a moment, Joe Bundy rose and stole from the room.

"How came that old thing ter drop at Neva's feet?" he asked himself. "It was somewhar overhead, and I'd like ter know what shook it down."

He passed down by the stables and entered the ravine where lay the mouth of the mine.

"Ghosts or no ghosts," said he under his breath, "I'm goin' into the place."

He had no one to oppose him, for the men had knocked off work for the day, and in a little

time he reached the spot where the dusty paper had fallen at Neva's feet. He looked up but saw nothing but the wall of stone that seemed to tower a thousand feet above him, though he knew it was not very high.

Joe Bundy went back and in a few minutes was crawling along a ledge of dark rock, worming his lank body through small passages and feeling rats cross his feet every now and then.

At last he stopped and drew a match along the stone at his right. The little flame leaped up and showed him that he had made a discovery.

He could stand erect on the ledge and see that near him was a natural shelf which ran back into the gloom. Old Joe put up his hands and withdrew it with a cry.

"What's the use o' bein' skeered?" he exclaimed throwing his light toward the spot. "If its Jose Santado he can't hurt any one."

He was leaning forward now, with excitement in his eyes and the match was showing him the skeleton of a man lying on the shelf and partially covered with the dust of years. But Joe saw more than this; he saw the print of a human hand; he could count the fingers by the marks in the dust, and noticed that they were slender and had not been made very long.

For a few seconds Old Joe stared more at the finger-prints than at the skeleton.

"I am directly over the spot whar the document fell," said he. "It dropped from this shelf. It has been keeping Old Jose company all these years, but what means this hand-mark in the dust? No skeleton made it here? That hand was a hand of flesh an' blood."

All this was patent to the old miner. He held his light to the mark and viewed it from every side. There was nothing with the skeleton to give a clue to its identity—nothing for him to look at but the grimy bones which may have lain there for ages.

"I'll foller the ledge," said Old Joe. "I've never been here before, though I knew thar was a trail up here. Chip, who is always crawlin' about, told me that the old mine was full of roads which nobody ever heard of."

The man resumed his crawl. He passed down the narrow corridor and wedged his way between the rocks that seemed at times determined to drive him back.

All at once he stopped and fell back. The ledge seemed to be crumbling beneath his very hands, and with a cry which he could not choke off he felt everything before him giving way.

Half chilled by the thought of falling headlong into some unknown depths, Old Joe tried to save himself by clutching at the wall that rose above him on the right, but his hands slipped off and he came back to the edge of the path which crumbled as his weight fell upon it.

The match had already fallen from his hand—the last match he had—and in another moment he found himself clinging to the precipice over which hung his body with nothing between him and death.

Joe Bundy held his breath and tried to collect his scattered thoughts. He tried to shriek, but the words seemed to die on the tip his tongue. He was suspended in mid-air along a wall of unknown height. The terror of the situation seemed to freeze the very blood in his veins, and for the moment he inwardly cursed the day he found a home on Mesquite Ranch.

To hang there very long was impossible. Joe felt his strength failing and the wall began to break again. In another moment he would be falling down to death.

"This is the last o' the Bundys," thought he. "This is what a feller gets for trailing a dead man in a mine. Why didn't I keep out o' the muddle? I might have known that I was crawlin' in the wake o' the ghost I see'd last summer, an'—Heavens, thar goes my grip!"

It was true. The wall had crumbled once more at the top, and his hand had fallen from the breaking pieces.

He was going down—down, his head in a whirl, and darkness which might mean more than mere death was his portion. Joe's last recollection was a sudden stopping, then another bound into space, and that was all.

But it did not end in death. The old man came back to life in total darkness. His senses swam, but by degrees they came around to their normal condition, and he staggered to his feet.

He was without matches, and could not see what were his surroundings.

"I may be half-way down ter China," said Old Joe. "I've stopped somewhar near the middle of the earth, but I can't hear the chopsticks, an' that makes me think that I may be nigher America than the pigtail kingdom. Let's

see what the hole is like. I kin use my fingers for eyes, an' thus get the hang o' the place."

He began to move round the hole into which he had dropped, stumbling here and there over little heaps of stones, and cutting his shins in the various falls; but at last he came back to where he had started from, having discovered that he was in a nearly circular chamber without the sign of an outlet as far as he could see.

He started out again, but suddenly stopped and picked up something upon which he had stepped.

"This ain't a rock," said he. "It's too shape-ly to be that. It feels round, like a silver dollar, but it's too rough for money. Why, where am I, anyhow? Here's another one jest like it, an' another! Jericho! the hull ground seems ter be kivered with 'em in this corner. I believe I have fallen inter Jose Santado's treasure-house!"

The very thought of such a thing seemed to take his breath, and he stood for some minutes against the wall, feeling the round objects he had picked up from the floor.

"If this is money of the old Spaniard's makin', an' this his money-chest, thar ought ter be a way out of it," said he. "It hardly stands ter reason that he would have a treasury which he could not visit when he wanted some loose change."

He was moving about once more, this time further from the wall, when all at once his hand touched something on the ground. In an instant he had swooped upon it with the speed of the hawk. But what he picked up this time crumbled in his hands.

"That was the last of the old miner's rope-ladder!" groaned Joe. "He came down here by that means, an' I am cooped up in the treasure-house of the dead, an', unless found, must perish amid wealth untold!"

He went back to the wall and struck it with one of the stones he had found; but there was no echo.

CHAPTER VII.

HOMELESS AND MINELESS.

A DAY and a night passed, and Mesquite Ranch had a mystery.

Joe Bundy had been missing for hours, and no one could tell anything about him.

Mustang Merle and Red Hawk had scoured the neighborhood, and the men had not worked since his disappearance.

Night was coming on again, but the hunt had not been given up. Meantime the threat of Dolores Dick was not forgotten, and the men of the ranch were on the alert.

Creeping through a narrow ravine not far from the one which contained the mouth of Merle's mine was the figure of an Indian. The young Apache had come out on his own account and was moving like a trailing hound over the ground, making no noise and seeing all the darker shadows that lay ahead of his path.

Suddenly he halted and stood still with a huge rock at his back. His quick ears had detected a sound which would hardly have roused a fox.

He leaned from the wall of the gulch at last, and fastened his eyes upon an object which appeared to be as still as himself, but which he had seen move a minute before.

Red Hawk had watched this thing for a spell, when it came on again and he drew back, hugging the rock, but keeping one hand on the revolver he carried. If he had found Rubio, woe to the outlaw and mine-claimant, for the man he had ambushed was near.

Red Hawk moved not, though the object crept so close to him that he could have touched it without difficulty.

In another moment it had darted off, and so quickly that the young Indian himself was startled.

"It was the man who ambushed Red Hawk," said the Apache. "Have they come for the mine? Has he come with the mark on his arm for the gold which he says belongs to him?"

The crawler was already out of sight, and the Indian, losing the trail, went back to the house. He was nearing the building when he heard the gentle closing of a door. Some one had come out of the house, and was now between him and it.

Red Hawk stopped again. He crouched under the tree by which he had halted and waited. If the person came toward him he would know who it was or lose his life in the attempt. Some devilry was afoot, and danger to Mesquite seemed to lurk in every shadow.

The young Indian was not compelled to wait very long, for the object which had emerged from the house came on, and all at once he saw

rise from the ground, at his very feet as it were, a human figure.

The next instant the Apache threw himself forward and fell like a panther on the neck of the man.

There was a quick cry and a recoil, but the hands of the Indian were not to be shaken off, and he was dragged out of the shadow of the tree and into the starlight.

"The red viper, just as I thought!" cried a voice, as Red Hawk clung tenaciously to the form he had fastened on.

"Yes, Red Hawk has found Rubio, the renegade, and the man who claims the mine!" was the answer.

"Right you are and you have found him to your sorrow!"

The struggle which these words started again was of short duration, for the hands of the Half Comanche seemed to overcome Red Hawk as though they possessed supernatural strength, and the young Indian felt the long fingers of his enemy sinking into his throat.

He tried to break the hold of the dark hands of the half-breed; then he attempted to alarm the house with a loud cry, but the words died before they could be spoken, and the head of the Apache fell back on the man's shoulders.

Of the time that passed from that moment until he came back to life Red Hawk kept no record. When he felt the air on his face again he was riding across a prairie, but not alone. There sat near him on a horse similar to his own a figure which he looked at the second time before he recognized it.

"Don't you know me?" said the person at his side.

The Indian uttered a loud cry.

"You are Merle! What has happened?"

"Much that is terrible," was the reply. "In the first place Mesquite is in the hands of the enemy. Two nights ago there swooped down upon it the very fiends of Tartarus. The old house still stands—that is better than Captain Cussed treated us—but all else is lost."

Red Hawk who had not lost a single word of all this passed his hand over his brow as if to assure himself that he was not dreaming.

"The agency of demons worked the catastrophe," continued Merle. "The men on guard were drugged, or 'spelled' in some strange manner. They slept at their posts, and when I awoke I found the house in the hands of the rascals themselves. Dolores Dick and Rubio, his right bower, came like foxes to a coop and caught us all. You were off somewhere and we had no chance to defend ourselves. The men were drawn up in line before the victors and offered one of two alternatives—to be shot down or take an oath not to molest Dick and his pard."

"Merle, did two men do this?" asked Red Hawk.

"Two men," was the reply. "I know you cannot comprehend it, Red Hawk, but, as I have said, the agency of fiends was at work. We were helpless before they roused us."

"But how did my brother escape?"

"I was taken to the mine which I know like a book. I was placed in the little chamber where the walls are so high that we cannot see to the top with our torches. Rubio and his pard did not know that chamber as I know it. They had overlooked the movable rock in the corner—the one which Jose Santado left long ago with the writing on its top. I was bound and left to perish there in the dark, but the ragged edges of one of the walls severed my thongs and I escaped. I discovered you lying half dead near the creek where I supposed you had been left by some one, and finding the two horses which had broken from the corral, I helped you to the back of one and here we are."

"And Neva?"

"She went off with the paroled men; but she would not swear not to oppose the mine-grabbers—not she, brave girl! But the boys forced her to accompany them, and ere this she is far off, believing me dead in the mine we were going to defend to the bitter end."

The lips of the young Indian met firmly behind the last word of his next sentence:

"Merle, we live to pay them back!"

In an instant the young rancher was leaning toward his ally and their hands met midway between the two steeds.

"From this hour, Red Hawk, I live for nothing else," he said. "The mine is mine and it shall not remain in the hands of the thieves. I know what they will do. They will call to their aid men as desperate as themselves; Dolores Dick, whom I left for dead more than a year ago in Mesquite Valley, when we were pursued by the Red Jacket Bravos, thinks he has

accomplished his revenge, but he shall know that Mustang Merle still lives and his pard, Rubio, the Man with the Marked Arm, shall wish he had never heard of the mine of Jose Santado. I swear this, Red Hawk, under the stars of heaven!"

The young rancher had risen in his stirrups and was holding his right hand toward heaven while the Indian watched him with silent approval.

"We are but two now," continued Merle. "Joe has perished at the hands of the mine-grabbers. The death of the faithful old pard leaves us to fight the battles of Mesquite alone. I am ready."

"And Merle will find the Apache near him at all times ready with his hand and weapons to help him conquer the enemies of the ranch."

The two companions rode on over the prairie and the stars shone upon them until they entered the shadows of the hills. The mine was in the hands of the foe. Dolores Dick and Rubio had triumphed by one of the deepest and coolest schemes imaginable and their victory seemed complete.

"They will hunt for us," said the young Indian. "When they discover that you are not in the mine they will take to the trail."

"Ah, that will be well," cried Merle. "Then we shall meet them."

He was about to speak again when the dark hand of his red ally touched his arm and he saw the finger of Red Hawk leap to his lips.

"Look, brother," whispered the Indian pointing down the valley which they had just entered. "Are not the bravos of the border coming up to help the two fiends hold the mine?"

Mustang Merle, looking over the Indian's outstretched arm, saw a line of moving figures and the next minute they were sitting in silence, but with their hands on the reins ready to ride forward in an instant.

Both Merle and Red Hawk counted them—eighteen in all—and when they had passed out of sight, they looked into each other's faces.

"What thinks my brother now?" queried the young Apache.

"More to fight, perhaps, but I am not daunted," was the reply. "Behind us is Mesquite and the mine, too. Red Hawk, though the old ranch swarmed with such as we have seen to-night, I would not give up the battle. I want peace, but will fight for it. The mine may cost a lot of blood, but it shall not be tamely surrendered to the rascals who hold it now."

A look of pride came into the fine eyes of the Indian youth and he said:

"If my brother were an Apache he would be a chief!"

There was no answer, but Mustang Merle's glance showed that the compliment had been received with reverence, and when he looked again toward the moving line of desperadoes all had disappeared and they were the only occupants of the quiet little valley.

Suddenly Red Hawk sprang to the ground and bent over the trail made by the horsemen. In a moment he came running back to his friend.

"They are the men from the camps along the Tagus," he said. "Red Hawk knows the tracks their horses make for he has followed them before."

"I thought so, Red Hawk. They are vultures and belong to the same family as the two that hold the fort behind us. Please Heaven, the time shall come when we will clip their talons and shorten their beaks!"

Ten minutes later the valley shadows seemed to fall upon no living person, and Merle and his red ally, with the tide of fortune against them, were not to be seen.

CHAPTER VIII.

WITH THE ENEMY.

MUSTANG MERLE had spoken truly when he told Red Hawk that Mesquite had fallen into the hands of the enemy.

Rubio and Dolores Dick had got possession of the ranch by a clever stratagem, old in some parts of the world, but new in the Southwest. The deep cunning of the two rascals had no limit and they were ready to profit by it whenever opportunity offered.

It was customary for the young owner of the ranch to leave some faithful men on guard and on the night of the surprise this caution was not neglected. The men had not forgotten Joe Bundy's encounter with the masked man supposed to be Dolores Dick himself, and Merle had cautioned his friends to be on the alert at all hours.

But in spite of all this the blow had fallen and

now he and Red Hawk were wanderers on the prairie, soon to be hunted, perhaps, by those from whom they had fled.

While the young fugitives are abroad on the open, planning future vengeance, let us go back to the ranch and take a look at things there.

The appointments of the house were not touched by the captors. They seemed afraid to disturb what they had taken, and it was soon seen that the main prize battled for was the boy's mine.

"Isn't this worth coming for?" said Rubio, standing in one of the underground chambers of the mine and looking at his companion who was near at hand gazing at the wealth which surrounded them. "Here is the gold of Jose Santado and it is ours!"

"We have enough here to play all over the Southwest," was the reply, as the eyes of the speaker glittered. "It was a clean sweep, Rubio. I am almost satisfied now; the boy is a prisoner in his own mine, and all the rest are scattered."

"The girl was pretty," said Rubio. "I saw her long ago, when her father was a wanderer, but I did not know she had been left at Mesquite. It seems, now that she became an orphan here, and that when her father died she resolved to remain. I thought she would take the oath with the men, but she preferred to go with them, but would not swear."

"I saw defiance in her eye when we called them all up," answered Dolores Dick.

The outlaw, as he spoke, took out a handsome watch and consulted it for a moment.

"They will be here to-night," he said. "We can't run this mine alone, Rubio."

The man whom he addressed frowned deeply.

"Must they come?" he growled. "They will want so much for coming, and we will have to divide. That will cut our own share short."

The outlaw laughed.

"Look round you. Isn't there enough for twenty men? Remember, this old mine was worked long before we came into the world, and there must be thousands of dollars hid in it somewhere. Jose Santado worked it for all it was worth, and he was not the man to leave one vein of it untouched."

"Let us see," cried Rubio, snatching up a torch and plunging away. "We have plenty of time before us and might as well use it in looking at the prize we have won."

He was followed by Dolores Dick and in a few minutes they were exploring the mine. They went from chamber to chamber and all at once Rubio stopped and held the light near the wall.

They were at the rock which bore the inscription signed by Jose Santado, and above it was the sign that had its counterpart on Rubio's arm—the serpent and broken arrow.

"Your copy is a faithful one," said Dick. "The man who made it for you knew how to do such things."

"He did," grinned Rubio. "It made me Jose Santado's heir all the same, and I have helped you to the riches of the dead."

They resumed their search, entering other chambers, all of which Mustang Merle had worked, finding everywhere proofs of the wealth of the mine.

"I would like to look in upon the prisoner," said Rubio. "Is his cell near us?"

"Indeed, I can hardly tell you where it is. I have not become used to this mine."

"Wasn't it the little chamber with the tall, smooth walls?"

"Yes."

"Then, I know where it is," was the instant reply. "I have been here before," and Rubio started down a narrow corridor followed as before by the handsome outlaw.

In a short time he turned up in a room the walls of which the torch revealed and Dolores Dick exclaimed that they were in the young rancher's dungeon.

"But where is he?" cried Rubio, turning upon his friend. "If you left him here he has crept through the solid rock, or has dissolved into thin air."

Already a look of astonishment had taken possession of the outlaw's face, and he was searching every part of the place with a pair of eager eyes.

"Look! here is the hole of the rat," said Rubio, shoving the torch near the ground in one corner of the chamber. "Here is the hole made or discovered by Jose years ago. The boy knew it, as he should, and wanted nothing better than imprisonment here."

Dolores Dick with muttered curses was staring at the opening in the wall, feeling that the captive had crawled through it to liberty.

"This stone which he removed was adroitly set in the wall and when he had severed his thongs on the sharp edges of the rocks that jut from the wall, he was ready to play fox and creep out. Shall we follow him?"

"Yes, yes!" cried Dick, and in a moment the twain were creeping through a dark passage which led them to a larger corridor, from which they moved into the open air.

"The boy is only one against odds," said Dick, with a light laugh which did not go very far toward reassuring Rubio. "You finished the young Indian by choking, and we need not look for any attack single-handed by Merle of Mesquite. Hark!" and the speaker turned and held a hand at his ear as though he had caught a suspicious sound.

"The boys are coming," he said a moment later, and then they went forward and waited for the advancing steeds near the house.

In a few minutes eighteen horsemen drew rein in front of the ranch and Dolores Dick and his companion greeted them. They were the same men seen by Merle and Red Hawk in the valley, and when they dismounted and had gathered round the two captors of the mine, they were loud in their praises of the successful strategists.

It was easily seen that the new-comers were men after Dick and Rubio's own natures, for they wore the dress of the border ruffian and looked like the typical rascal of the frontier. Nearly all carried revolvers prominently displayed, and all were dark of face and merciless of eye.

They were taken over the house which had fallen into the hands of Dick and Rubio and were in high glee when they found some rich wine in the boy rancher's cellar. This was a signal for a banquet, which lasted far into the night, and the brigands of the border kept high carnival over the vintage of the captured ranch.

When the banquet was at its height Rubio stole from the house and went down over the pasture to the banks of the stream which fringed it with a line of silvery water.

He knew where he had left Red Hawk after the deadly choking he had administered, and he was anxious to see if the boy was still there. If Merle had escaped it might be possible that Red Hawk had come back to life, and this is what took Rubio to the little stream.

The sky was studded with stars when he went over the waving grass and neared the water. He reached the creek and walked along the bank for some distance.

"It was here that I left the crimson-fox," said Rubio. "I threw him into the water and turned away. But I don't see him."

He kept on, looking at the ground with all eyes, but the object he sought for was not to be seen.

"What if the Indian came back to life after all that choking?" he cried, stopping short as the full meaning of his words forced themselves upon him. "I don't like to think of that, for the young red rascal is a host, and if he has joined his friend and master, Mustang Merle—"

Rubio was perplexed and fell back, thinking of nothing but the disappearance of the Indian's body.

"May be Merle found it and gave it burial somewhere," he said at last. "He would do that, of course, for he owed the red-skin a great deal, and would not let him become food for vultures and wolves. It must be thus, for after the work of these hands of mine a return to life was impossible."

For a few moments longer Rubio skirted the stream and looked everywhere, but he was compelled to go back with the mystery still unsolved. The banquet was still at its height and he crept up to the house and looked on a little while.

"I didn't invite those men," said he under his breath. "I did not want them to share our triumph. That was Dick's doing, just as though he don't think himself safe here with Rubio."

Then he stole off and went back to the mine where he repaired to the main chamber and viewed the quartz crushers by the aid of his torch.

All at once he turned and leaned toward the corridor by which he had entered the room. A singular noise had reached his ears.

"This mine isn't haunted, I hope," said Rubio to himself. "The bones of Jose would be in the treasure-house which is far off, but which I don't want to visit while I am likely to be followed by any one. I have been down into the depths of the money-chamber and this is one of the secrets I am keeping from Dolores Dick."

After a while he crept from the room and went up to a passage overhead. He crawled along it some distance when he suddenly saw the

prints of hands and feet in the dust on the floor.

"Some one's been here!" cried Rubio. "These are not the prints of my hands and are too large to be those of Merle's."

While he listened he heard the same strange sound again and then he bounded forward at the risk of breaking his neck by a tumble in the dark.

"Great Caesar!" he cried, "there's some one in the treasure-house."

CHAPTER IX.

JOE BUNDY TURNS UP AGAIN.

RUBIO held his breath and waited a long time for a repetition of the noise which had drawn the exclamation from him, but it was not repeated. He was leaning over the edge of a pit, but could not see the bottom.

Finally he knocked a piece off his torch and watched it descend, casting light as it went down. It struck the floor and burned there, but did not reveal all the corners of the place.

Presently he went back, but returned with a rope which had loops at intervals, and this he lowered over the pit, fastening the upper end of the cord over a sharp rock, which seemed to have been used before for a like purpose.

Rubio, with the courage of a desperado, now lowered his body over the fringe of the dark place, and began to descend. He went down with ease by setting his feet in the loops, and at last stood on the floor of the chamber.

There he found the treasure-house as he had left it on a former visit, when, unbeknown to Merle and his men, he had helped himself to some of its wealth. Shining gold pieces of uncouth coinage were scattered over the ground at his feet, but he did not care for them now.

All at once Rubio fell back with a cry, and the next moment something human in shape leaped upon him from one of the corners, and as a pair of long hands gripped his throat, he was flung from the center of the room to land heavily against the wall.

"I thought some one would come and let me out," said a voice, as Rubio struck, and then the torch which had fallen from his grasp, and was burning on the floor, showed him a form moving up the dangling rope with the agility of a sailor.

It was half-way up before he could reach the rope, and when he did so he tried to pull it from the rock overhead, but, failing in this, he cursed the hour that brought him to the mine.

Rubio fell back suddenly and drew his revolver. The man on the rope was still in sight, but would soon reach the top and disappear. He threw up the six shooter, took aim, and fired at the climbing body.

The report seemed to stun its maker, and the blazing torch showed him a sudden movement on the part of his living target, but it did not drop.

In another moment it drew itself over the edge of the wall, and Rubio knew that the prisoner of the treasure-house had escaped.

"In heaven's name, who was that?" cried the Man with the Marked Arm. "I thought we had dealt with all of the men of Mesquite. They told us that all were marshaled before Dick, with the exception of Red Hawk, and I knew what had become of him."

He sprang to the rope with his last word, and with a knife in his teeth was about to pursue the one who had eluded him when the rope itself came down on his head!

Rubio recoiled with a cry of horror.

He was himself a prisoner of the treasure-house, and without aid he could not expect to escape.

"You kin take my place, pard," came down from above. "I don't expect ter be relieved by you, but it's all right, an' you have the thanks o' the last o' the Bundys. Good-by forever if I don't change my mind an' see you later, which ain't likely," and the voice died away in a chuckle which drove another curse from Rubio's tongue.

"Joe Bundy! It was that Yankee rascal, was it?" he cried. "I wish I had had an inkling that this old place held him. I would be up there now and he where I am. He was in the treasure-house; but how came he here? There was no rope and one cannot fall from the top without losing his life."

The puzzle deepened for Rubio, for the miracle of Old Joe's escape from death was not to be revealed to him, and he saw his torch burn out, leaving him in total darkness.

Meantime the man who had climbed up Rubio's ladder had made his way from the mine and was nearing the ranch-house.

Suddenly he stopped and listened to the sounds of rude laugh and jest that came to his ears.

"Jehosaphat! what has happened?" he cried. "It seems ter me that Merle has some uncommon funny visitors, and they're having high old times over his wine. Joe Bundy, this ain't a dream, for you're as hungry as a wolf an' thar's no restaurant handy."

Old Joe crept closer to the house and crouching near the window, looked in upon a scene which at first bewildered him. He saw the men of the border making merry at the long table in the main room of the ranch and at the head of the board sat the handsome Dolores Dick.

In an instant, as it were, the whole truth flashed upon the old man's mind. Mesquite had fallen into the hands of the enemy and they were celebrating their victory.

"Mebbe if I hadn't had my mishap this wouldn't have happened," said Joe while he looked on with a frown. "The hull lay-out seems to be theirs jest now. I wonder what's become o' the ranch forces? Whar is Merle, an' Red Hawk, the cunnin', an' Neva? It's more than I can guess an' I'm pretty good at puzzles, too."

The wild scene before him had a strange fascination for the old gold-seeker and he crouched there a long time, drinking it in and wishing for ten good men with Winchesters to give another coloring to it. He heard Dolores Dick propose in mock tones the health of Mustang Merle, and then came the clinking of glasses and the derisive laugh of the revelers.

"Ain't there a weepin somewhere about?" cried Joe. "I can't stand all this an' a good Winchester poked in at the window might break up the hilarity of the occasion."

He went back to the stables and found strange horses there. They were saddled, and their heated flanks told him that they had been ridden hard from far away. In one of the buckskin holsters he found a revolver, and with it clutched in his hand, came back to the house; but at the window he halted and shook his head.

"A shot might not help Merle any if he is a prisoner. It would only make the gang more merciless toward him an' I guess I won't break up the banquet."

Old Joe now went everywhere, searching the place for signs of Merle and his friends, but of course was not rewarded. He came back to the house and saw the door open, and the figure of Dolores Dick appear at the threshold. The light from the room fell upon him, showing his splendid form to the old miner, and he drew back among the shadows of the cedars and watched him.

Dick had left the revelers and come out alone.

"I'd like to know what's become of Rubio," said he aloud. "The wily snake isn't to be trusted. He didn't want the boys to come up an' help us hold the ranch, and he's liable to play a game of his own."

"That's jest what the rascal's played, Dolores Dick," said Joe to himself. "I left him in the treasure-house, an' if you will jest keep from lookin' thar a few hours, old Jose will have a pard in the mine."

Dick came forward and left the porch, rising like a giant before the man among the trees.

"With Merle escaped, and the men of the ranch sworn to keep off, I don't think we have much to fear now," he went on, the words sending a thrill of joy along Joe Bundy's nerves. "Rubio finished the young Indian, and he was dangerous. We have the upper hand, though I would like to have punished the boy rancher. I may yet. He may come back and try to retake his mine. I wish he would. I hope he will take a fool notion to recover the prize."

"He will if I ever find him," said Joe, in a whisper. "Mustang Merle will come back with good backin', if I do say it myself, for when you stir the Bundy blood it gets p'izen, an' it's pretty well stirred now."

Dolores Dick moved back toward the house, and when the door had closed upon his figure the man under the trees glided toward the stables, along which he was soon lost. In a short time he came out, leading a horse, and when he vaulted into the saddle he uttered an exclamation of joy, and shook his fist at the house.

"Oh, I'm comin' back," he cried. "Don't think for a moment that Joe Bundy makes it long between calls. He's used ter comin' often, an' especially whar he's not wanted, an' when he comes he sometimes outstays his welcome. It shall be so in this case. Yes, Dick an' pards, I'm comin' back."

He dashed across the pasture, taking to the open as soon as he could, and rode away under the stars that lit up the vault of night; but

every now and then bending over, as if looking for the trail he wanted to pick up.

But the night was too dark, after all, or else there were no marks in the grass, for he saw nothing that rewarded his keen eyes, and he was far from Mesquite when the hour of midnight came.

"I didn't hear Dick say anything about Neva," said Joe. "He did not mention the girl, an' one would have thought he would have brought her in, for she is pretty, an' jest the kind ter please him. She must be somewhar. Did she go off with the men who swore not ter fight Dick an' his gang?"

Joe had reined in his stolen steed in the center of a ravine between two picturesque hills and was following up his expressed thoughts with others when a sharp click startled him and he laid his hand on the brigand's revolver.

"You don't need to draw," said a voice at his horse's feet. "I dont think you'd shoot me, anyhow."

Joe Bundy bent down and looked into the upturned face, then sprung from the saddle and seized the hands of the speaker.

"You've turned up like a ghost, Neva," he cried. "Bless me, if I wasn't jest talkin' about ye. And here ye ar' as large as life an' jest as pretty as ever. What hev you been an' whar ar' the rest of the boys?"

In an instant a flash came into the dark eyes of the girl, for Neva actually stood before the old miner.

"Where are they, the cowards?" she cried. "You will have to look far beyond these hills. They took the parole the two scoundrels offered, but, though I rode off with them, I did not, and I am here ready to wage war against the enemies of Mesquite. I came back as soon as I could quit the company of the men of the ranch. Merle is somewhere in the grip of the foe—"

"No, he has escaped," broke in Joe.

"Thank fortune!" cried the girl. "Then old Mesquite will be redeemed. The mine will be ours when the end comes. The gold-grabbers can't hold their prize."

Old Joe gave the fair girl a look of admiration.

CHAPTER X.

"GOLDEN BUCK."

MESQUITE had been four days in the hands of the enemy and nothing had occurred to break his hold on the rich prize.

Rubio had been rescued from the pit by his friends and he had told them that he had dropped into the place, but had not intimated that it was old Jose Santado's treasure-house. The Man with the Marked Arm was playing a game of his own for that was his nature, and he had resolved to let no secret which he wished to keep all to himself fall into the hands of others.

The desperadoes who had come up from the Southwest at Dolores Dick's bidding were still on the ranch. They had scouted the surrounding country, but had not seen anything of those who had escaped, and all were settling down to the opinion expressed by Dick that Merle had abandoned all hopes of retaking the mine and had left the region, glad to get off with his life.

Night was closing after the fifth day of the forced occupation when a good-looking youth mounted on a small mustang rode over the hills that bordered the little stream near the pasture and drew rein in front of the ranch-house just when the invaders were congregated on the sward.

In an instant he was the cynosure of all eyes, and the bandits of the border were soon about him. He sat on the little steed with his clear dark eyes looking down upon them, but he soon singled out Dolores Dick, whom he addressed.

"I thought I would ride this way and see if I couldn't get a job," said the youth. "I can do 'most anything that is to be done on a well-appointed ranch like this, from punching cattle to taking a hand at the pick. I used to work in a mine in the Coleras country, as you can see by this," and he drew from his pocket a paper which he handed to the handsome outlaw.

Dick took the reference and read it aloud to the assembled men. It gave the bearer a good name for all work and recommended him as a fine judge of gold, and said that his former employer parted with him with much regret, and so forth.

"I guess you can get down," said Dick, when he had finished the paper, which he handed back to its owner. "We may find something for you to do here; but you're apt to find a good deal of

time on your hands which you can put in as you think best."

The boy slipped lightly to the ground and stood before the desperadoes, well pleased.

He had informed them that his name was Buck Branson, sometimes called Golden Buck, on account of his knowledge of gold, and to test it, Dick took him direct to the mine and placed in his hands several lumps of quartz.

The opinion which the new hand gave out after a brief study of the lumps was confirmed by the crushing mills, and he stood from that moment high in the mine-grabber's estimation.

Golden Buck was shown to Neva's old room in the ranch-house and told that thereafter it was his quarters.

"Seems to me a woman used to inhabit this room?" said he, turning upon Dick ere he left the apartment after having shown him up.

"The last one to occupy this room was a girl who went off when we came."

"Why did she go?" asked Golden Buck, with curiosity.

"Didn't like the change of masters, I guess," grinned Dick. "She was pretty enough to have won a husband if she had stayed, but you know girls have queer notions sometimes and this one wasn't an exception."

"Won't she ever come back for the little things she left behind?"

"I reckon not."

"I wouldn't have left that mirror, nor that tidy. Did she make them?"

"I suppose so; but are you fond of girls, Golden Buck?"

The young hand burst into a light laugh.

"Oh," said he, "I like a pretty face, of course, but hers is one I shall never see, so what's the use of talking about it? Good-night, Captain Dick."

The door closed and Golden Buck was alone. He was soon in the dark for he blew out the light which the captain of the invaders of Mesquite had left on the table, and stood in the dim reflection of the stars.

The next day, to show what he could do with the lasso, Golden Buck went forth to where the cattle were, stampeded a number and brought down several with the loop, his feat being witnessed by the whole band, which applauded him, and he doffed his hat before them all.

"I never saw a boy have such deep black eyes," said Dolores Dick to one of his friends. "They are pretty enough to be in the head of a girl like the one who went off with the pard of the ranch when we came down upon it the other day."

"I've noticed those eyes myself. They are very pretty, and when you complimented him to-day he blushed just like a girl, but the next moment looked half-ashamed of it."

"That did not escape my eye," answered Dick. "With a few more years the boy would make a capital bravo, for he has no fear, and is as nery as an old cowboy."

Meantime the subject of these remarks had returned to the house, where he came suddenly upon Rubio, the Man with the Marked Arm.

He found Rubio alone in Mustang Merle's room with a lot of papers before him. Among them were several letters which he had just taken from the boy rancher's desk.

"You write, don't you?" said Rubio, seeing who had come in.

"No, that is where I missed it," was the reply.

The Half-Comanche grinned.

"What! a good-looking boy like you not know how to write?" he exclaimed.

"Where I was raised there was nothing like a school. I have spent my life on ranches, and have never thought of learning what seemed of no use to me."

The man seemed nonplused for a moment, but he threw a letter in front of Golden Buck.

"I found that in this desk," said he. "It is a letter from the girl, Neva, who used to occupy your room, to Mustang Merle, and I thought that if you wrote, we would get up a good answer to it just for the fun of the thing."

Golden Buck stooped and picked up the letter, which he read standing. All the time the keen eyes of Rubio were fixed upon him, and not a move of a muscle escaped them.

"If you really don't write," said he, "we can't have our little fun," he smiled. "You came from Colonel Banda's ranch, eh?"

"I served him last."

"When?"

"Last summer."

"Before he died?"

Golden Buck seemed to start a little.

"Colonel Banda is not dead," he said. "You must have been misinformed. I saw him last week at Tagus City."

Again the Man with the Marked Arm looked beaten. It was evident that he was seeking to entangle the boy, but the youth was proving too much for him.

"You came from Tagus City, did you? Well, did you see or hear anything of the former owner of this ranch?"

"Of the boy called Mustang Merle?"

"Yes."

"I heard that he passed through there, but that was before I reached the town, and I heard it by accident."

"Was he alone?"

"I cannot say."

"Boy, don't you know that it is possible that you may not have heard any such news?"

In an instant the face of Golden Buck colored and he took a sudden step toward the watchful hawk.

"If my word is doubted I can hunt another job," cried he, halting in front of Rubio and looking down into his upturned face. "Are you master here? When did you acquire this ranch and how? I am my own master and have been ever since I left home, running away from a cruel father. You look like the man called Rubio. You look like a person who has had a price on his head, and who, if all reports concerning him are true, should not be quietly seated here."

"Beware!" cried the Half-Comanche. "This is insolence and from a bantling! I can send you adrift at any time, and you need not think that I am not powerful here."

"I hired to Dolores Dick," was the quick response. "I am responsible to him and to no other man on this ranch. He will dismiss or pay me, and I will not be questioned like a witness in the cage by a man like you."

The following moment the young cattle-puncher was striding from the room and Rubio biting his lips, was glaring at him from eyes that fairly snapped.

"I don't think I'm far from wrong," said he under his breath. "By Jupiter! it is a fine game if it is true, and from what I have heard of her, she was just the sort of person to play it. You will answer to Dolores Dick will you? Take care, my young fellow; you may have to answer to Rubio."

He rose and shut the desk with a bang, then crossed the room and disappeared toward the mine.

As he left the house a face which he did not see was turned toward him, and a pair of eyes that looked closely at him followed him until his figure was lost to sight.

Golden Buck, the cowboy, went up to his little room. There he sat down and wrote a moment on a slip of paper which he placed in an inner pocket, after which he left the room and went down among the stables.

Night was not far off now, and when it came he stole across the pasture and ran through the shadows, then turned up the ravine beyond the mouth of the mine where he stopped and thrust what he had written in a crack in the gulch wall.

"I believe the head rascal of the ranch suspects me, but I shall face him with all the nerve I have," said Golden Buck.

CHAPTER XI.

A BARGAIN AND A NOOSE.

THE capture of Mesquite had not escaped attention and the successful swoop of Rubio and Dolores Dick was a topic of conversation among the camps and towns of the Rio Tagus country.

For the most part those who heard of the rascally piece of business treated it lightly, or laughed at what they called a "clever trick," for all knew that the fortune which the mine should yield to its plunderers would eventually find its way to the gaming dens of the Southwest, and that the two pards would lose every dollar of their ill-gotten gains under the lights of the monte dens of Tagus and other towns.

Besides this, the man from whom Mustang Merle received the ranch had never associated with the lawless characters of the border, and it was thought that he had been slain by one of these men, for he was found dead on his ranch and the fine property which he had accumulated had passed into the hands of a boy, who, like his dead friend, was the enemy of the roving bands of bandits who swept the country and robbed and plundered at will.

It was not unusual for bets concerning Merle's peaceful tenure of Mesquite to be made. It was expected that some day the ranch would be taken from him, and when it was known that

Captain Cussed had burnt the buildings, it was thought that his dominion over Mesquite had come to an end; but when they saw him not only regain his own, but annihilate the Red Jacket Bravos, the prophets had a serious back-set.

While Golden Buck was performing duties at Mesquite, a man well known to the reader rode quietly into Tagus, the nearest town to the ranch, and slid from the saddle in front of its only public house.

His figure was lank and not handsome, but he had a pair of black eyes in his head and a short stubby beard of a few days' growth.

It was Old Joe Bundy.

"I'm kinder forgotten here since I've become an unattached gentleman," observed the old man, looking at the men grouped on the long porch of the hotel smoking or telling broad yarns. "I used ter be a man of distinction here, but since I'm a houseless wanderer, I've dropped out o' notis, an' I don't seem ter attract any 'tention."

He slipped his arm through the rein and walked up to the porch.

"Hello, gents!" said he. "You don't appear ter know the last o' the Bundys."

Some of the toughs assembled remarked that the Bundy family was no longer above par in Tagus, but the old man leaned against the dirty columns and smiled.

"When a fellar loses his home," said he, "he loses friends. For instance: I've been run off of Mesquite by a brace of rascals an' among ye all thar's not one who will sympathize with a chap in my sad predicament."

"Why didn't you have your eyes open when they came down upon you?" queried a large man who had been eying Joe with a look of keen merriment.

"Why was I in the trap in the old mine?" said Joe. "But that's what I came to town for. I'm lookin' for a man named Brad Murphy."

At this there was a general laugh and a loud call for "Brad," and the next moment there stepped forward a little man who looked anything but handsome.

"What is it?" he said in a squeaking tone, sidling up to Joe, who had turned to meet him.

"Are you Mr. Murphy?"

"No, sir; I'm 'Brad' Murphy, though," and he stepped from the porch and walked off with the old miner who towered above him like a pine above a bush.

For some time neither spoke, and then Joe Bundy, looking down at the dwarfed figure at his side, said:

"Did you get the message I sent by the Indian?"

"I got it," was the reply. "It was delivered promptly, as that red-skin knows his business."

They turned a sharp corner in the old town and Brad Murphy opened the door of a little adobe hut and ushered Joe Bundy inside. There the two found a table without a candle and sat down on rickety stools in the dark.

"I come straight from Merle," continued Joe. "He wants your peculiar help. What can you do?"

The little man passed his hand through his yellowish beard which looked like gold-dusted hair, and watched Joe carefully for a moment.

"What can I do?" said he. "I can do a good deal, Joe Bundy. I am little, but thar's a good deal of power in Brad Murphy."

"Precious packages are generally small," observed Old Joe. "You can mu-ter—how many?"

Murphy was silent for a moment.

"Just as many as you need," said he with a grin. "I can turn out the best set of fellows you ever saw, but they're not here. I wouldn't trust a Tagus man out of my sight."

"Nor I, jedgin' from the crowd at the hotel. They're all alike."

"When do you want them?" queried Murphy.

"You represent Mustang Merle now?"

"I represent the best boy in these diggins," was the reply. "I come straight from him, an' what Joe Bundy does will be stood up to by my young pard."

"I can give you ten or twenty."

"Armed men?"

"Yes."

"No shirks?"

"I shoot shirks!" was the answer. "These men have been tried. They are Free Lances; they go wherever I send them and they don't ask any questions. They are paid for what they do an' by Brad Murphy."

"I want ten."

The little man drummed on the table with his bronzed fingers for a minute, and then looked up into Joe's face.

"When?" he said sententiously.

"We will want them at the rendezvous tomorrow. We will get some news from the inside—"

"Ah, you have a spy in the camp of the enemy?" smiled Murphy.

"We have a keen young ferret thar, an' what she—"

Old Joe stopped suddenly and did not resume, but Murphy seemed to know what he was about to say, for he nodded and slightly changed the subject.

"Tell Merle that to-morrow ten of the best men that ever served Brad Murphy will be at the rendezvous. I was waitin' for you at the hotel an' wasn't surprised ter see ye ride up. Here the sympathy is ag'in' you folks; you know why."

"Yes," said Joe grating his teeth. "They expect ter see some o' Mustang Merle's gold come to the gamin' tables o' Tagus, but unless it reaches 'em to-night, it never may!"

The tall figure of Joe Bundy standing erect almost touched the ceiling of Brad Murphy's hut, and the eyes of the little man regarded him as though he wished that he was as tall.

When the interview had been concluded between the two men Murphy accompanied Joe to the edge of the town and said good-night, after which he went back to the hotel to be chaffed by his friends who wanted to know if he had made anything by his interview with the evicted miner.

This sport at Murphy's expense was still high when there rode into the square in front of the building a man who dismounted and entered.

He was looked at by the occupants of the porch, and when one said it was Monte-Play, a man well known in some parts of the Southwest, all followed him into the bar-room. There, with a greeting for all, he turned up toward the crowd and received quite an ovation.

All at once a hand touched the new-comer's hand and a voice which no ear but his own heard, said:

"You are just in time. Joe Bundy has just had a talk with Murphy."

Monte did not appear to start, but his face seemed to change color, and after a few words with the crowd he slipped away and remounted.

The next moment he had turned his steed's head toward the north, and the horse was soon carrying him over the open country beyond the confines of the town.

"I did come just in time," he laughed to himself. "It was lucky that I found Jim in Tagus. When Joe Bundy meets Murphy, the old Free Lance of the border, something is up. That man sells the men who follow his fortunes. They never ask in whose cause they are to fight; they are perfect Free Lances, and the consultation means that they are to enter the employ of Mustang Merle, the boy rancher. This news must go straight to Mesquite. Dick must have it to-night, for this is a movement not to be despised. It means desperate work, for the Free Lances have deadly points and kill when they pierce."

He rode on, striking his steed with the spurs every now and then to urge him to greater efforts, and soon he had left the lights of Tagus far behind and seemed the only rider out under the stars.

But there was another, and it was not Joe Bundy who had accomplished his mission.

In the shade thrown by a clump of tall cacti which grew in the very heart of the plain over which Monte was galloping, stood a horse, which was completely sheltered by the spiny plants. The rider who sat astride this animal, which did not move, was not large, but he had a figure which was faultless in contour and indicative of strength, for it wore but little clothing.

It was as dark as the shadows in which it sat, and the keen ears of horse and rider heard the sound made by Monte coming forward on his mission of warning.

Nearer and nearer came the man from Mesquite. If he could have looked ahead and spied the tiger in ambush, he would have prepared for the inevitable, but the cacti shielded the grim destroyer.

All at once Monte came up with the man behind the bush. His horse shied as he caught sight of something there, and when Monte turned to see that something, a noose dropped over his head. It fell so suddenly and softly that he could not avoid it, and, as it tightened, he drew back and tried to throw it off, but too late.

The next moment he was on the ground, almost choked to death, and looking up into the face that bent over him from the back of the horse that had waited in the shadow, he knew that he had been noosed by an Indian, and that that Indian was Red Hawk, the Apache.

CHAPTER XII.

GOLDEN BUCK'S ORDEAL.

GOLDEN BUCK's resolve to face Rubio with a show of nerve was, under the circumstances, a good one, for the time was near when nerve would be needed.

When the new hand came back from depositing the letter in the crack of the wall of the ravine, Rubio saw him and his keen eyes followed him into the house.

"What took him across the pasture?" said the Man with the Marked Arm. "What took him there I would like to know if he is merely a cowboy and in our service? There is something wrong here, and I'm not the man to let such things go."

Golden Buck was asleep when velvety footsteps came to the door of his chamber and a dark-faced man listened there.

Presently the steps crept back, but the smile that flitted across the face of their maker was dark and threatening.

Rubio went back to the room below where he found Dolores Dick and a dozen of the men who had come to Mesquite by his invitation.

The Marked Arm could not conceal his feelings and as he came forward all eyes became fixed upon him.

"I didn't know we had a spy in the camp," said he.

"A spy?" cried Dick, looking at the man with astonishment. "Who is the spy?"

Rubio grinned.

"I have just come from the spy's door," he said. "I thought there was something more than eagerness in the eyes of our young bull-puncher, more than a mere desire to get a job."

"What, do you suspect Golden Buck?"

"I suspect nobody. I know!" was the quick and positive reply.

In an instant the handsome bandit was on his feet, and the men were staring at both him and Rubio.

"It can't be!" cried Dick. "You did not like him from the first. You growled when I hired him, and you did not like it because I told the boys to come up and help us hold the fort. We may need them ere long. You seem to forget that Mustang Merle and Joe Bundy are abroad, that they may secure the services of the Free Lances of the border; you—"

Rubio threw up his hand and broke Dolores Dick's sentence.

"I forget nothing," said he coolly. "I want no spies among us and none shall thrive here while I have a share of the mine I have led you to."

The two pards stood face to face and the men were looking at both, fully expecting one of those bloody collisions which occur so frequently between men of their sort.

"If I had not favored you, would we be here to-night?" asked Dick. "If I had not found Diaz, the traitor, on the open, riding to this very place to tell Merle that we were about to sweep down upon him and to divulge all our plans which he knew, would you stand under this roof a victor now? I lassoed that man and dragged him across the prairie at my horse's heels and you thanked me for it, for you then realized the service I had done the cause. Where is the traitor you speak of?"

"Up there asleep."

"You mean the boy?"

"The boy? ha, ha, ha!" laughed Rubio. "The boy! I mean the person who is called Golden Buck."

"Call him down," said Dick, and one of the men ran from the room and was heard ascending the stair.

Three minutes had not elapsed when two were heard coming down and the door opening into the room showed all the figure of the young cowboy at the desperado's heels.

Golden Buck came forward with wonderment in the eyes that had attracted so much attention, and in a moment he stood in front of the group.

Rubio stood where he could see him and his eyes fell at once to watching him like a hawk. No one spoke; all seemed unwilling to make the charge made when Golden Buck was absent, and for several minutes a dead silence filled the room.

"Make the charge," said Dick to Rubio. "You had him called out of bed. Say your say to his teeth."

The following moment the Man with the Marked Arm stepped forward and faced Golden Buck.

"You were across the pasture to-night?" he said.

The face watched so closely by all who heard these words did not lose a particle of color.

"What is it to you where I was?" was the answer.

"I told you so," said the look which Rubio shot at Dolores Dick. "I have the spy before you. He has admitted his guilt by not answering me fairly."

"You went beyond the edge of the field; you went to the mouth of the ravine."

No answer.

"When you came back you had the dust of the ravine on your shoes. You brushed them carefully when you went up to your room. You said you could not write, yet you wrote a letter after you told me this. You are a spy!"

This last charge was met by a flashing look from the eyes that confronted Rubio. The figure of Golden Buck seemed to lengthen in the light, and he fell back a step, but in order to get beyond reach of the long arm of the man of the brand.

"What does Dick think now?" asked Rubio. "You have eyes and they are quick to judge of what they see. Under the name of Golden Buck lies the plan of the enemy. Behold the girl who refused to take the oath of parole! Behold Neva of Mesquite!"

It was a thrilling tableau. In front of the white-faced cowboy stood Rubio with outstretched arm, and his quivering finger was covering the form a few feet away. Triumph unmistakable filled the gleaming eyes of the human wolf, and laughter was at the tip of his tongue.

"Spies are hanged!" he went on. "This one came from her master, and to-night she sent a letter to him. It went to the gulch and will be taken off by either Joe Bundy or his master. Look! Behold Neva, the female spy, and yet you sit there and stare!"

Dolores Dick had not moved, but was looking into the eyes before him, and was wondering if their owner was really the beautiful creature who had defied him before, when men were swearing not to draw a trigger against the man who had deprived them of a home.

"She does not speak," continued Rubio. "Guilt glues her tongue to the roof of her mouth."

"It is false!" suddenly fell from the lips of the silent one. "I can speak, as that scoundrel shall know. I am astonished that men of your stamp,"—her hand swept before Dick and his friends—"I am astonished that you listen to such a villain. Why, there is a price on his head now. He has sent men across the Llano Estacado tied to horses, with their faces turned to the vultures, and has followed them for miles laughing at their tortures. And yet you call that man your pard! You even help him to hold a mine which he claims to have heired when the mark which adorns his arm was stolen by him during one of his secret visits to the mine during its occupancy by Mustang Merle. Such is the man who dubs me a spy. What has he been?"

Despite Rubio's efforts to keep cool, his face grew crimson, and he looked like a person about to spring upon the one who had spoken.

"She unmasks herself," cried he, looking at Dolores Dick. "The message is on its way to Merle, and she is the one who wrote and sent it."

Dick turned once more to the cowboy.

"What is your answer?" he asked.

"I reply not to a charge from a man like the one who has just made it," was the response.

"Guilty!" shouted Rubio. "I will prove what I have said."

He came toward Golden Buck, but the next instant his hand was thrown aside, and he was looking into the muzzle of a small six-shooter from which he recoiled with the whitest face he had shown that night.

"You touch me at the peril of your life!" came over the shining barrel of the weapon in tones which were not the same as those in which the accused had just spoken.

Rubio, almost blinded by rage, had stopped and was striking his nails into the palms of his long, dark hands. The spectators seemed to enjoy his check, and he was glaring at the cowboy and watching, as it were, for a chance to carry out his purpose.

"Did you ever see such supreme folly?" cried the Man with the Marked Arm. "She threatens to shoot me in the camp of my friends, just as though she thought you would not tear her to pieces like a lot of lions."

"Do you think they would, Captain Rubio?" asked Golden Buck. "Why should these men avenge a death like yours? They never sent men to the vultures of the desert; they never made Mazeppas of their fellow-creatures."

Rubio turned to Dolores Dick who had been looking quietly on with a smile at the corners of his mouth, as if he really wanted him to move toward Golden Buck once more.

"Keep the spy in your employ!" he cried. "Keep him where he can warn Mustang Merle and his friends. But don't let him cross Rubio's path!"

"You have just called him 'boy' again," grinned the handsome sport.

"A slip of the tongue," was the answer. "That is Neva. I noticed the eyes the moment I saw them. She is here to watch us and to report all to her master and lover."

All of a sudden there mounted to the temples of the accused a flush which was not there before. The last words of Rubio seemed to have gone like an arrow to the mark, and when he saw the deep coloring he broke into a laugh.

"Convicted by her blush!" he exclaimed. "Now, is any more proof needed?"

Every eye was turned upon Golden Buck, and the tableau was not broken until Dick, smiling, said:

"Go back to bed. This can be settled to-morrow," and with a bow the cowboy of Mesquite walked from the room, followed by the gaze of every desperado in it.

When the door had shut behind the slight figure there were looks which told more than spoken language.

CHAPTER XIII.

A RUN IN THE DARK.

RUBIO was not more than half satisfied with his triumph. The tiger part of his nature had received a check which it could not brook, and when he had seen the door close upon Golden Buck's figure, he wheeled and left the room.

"They don't want to touch her; I see that," said he madly under his breath. "They see that Dolores Dick is smitten with the infernal beauty of the girl and they lean to him. I will soon be surrounded by a lot of spies myself—I who first planned the swoop and who brought them to these riches!"

He went down to the mine and in another minute was threading its dark corridors which seemed as well known to him as the trails of the desert.

"She won't be there when morning comes unless they watch her," he went on. "She will quit the house to-night and go back to her master. She has seen enough, perhaps; she knows our numbers, how we are situated, and the condition of our arms. What should keep her another hour at Mesquite?"

He was in the big chamber now, but he did not stop there. Taking from a dark place a rope ladder which he dragged along the upper passages of the mine, he fastened it to a jutting rock and went down hand over hand until he touched hard ground, when he fell back with a joyful cry.

Rubio was in the treasure-house again, but this time he knew a way out, and he did not have to depend on the men whom he had left in the ranch-house.

Now for the first time he struck a match and its little flame showed him piles of wealth which he began to cram into a long sack which he had brought down into the place.

He carried load after load up the ladder and secreted all in another part of the mine.

"The crash is coming. If I remain here I shall have to fight the conspirators," said he. "I am Rubio against all of them; but ere I go, if go I must, there shall be a blow struck which will echo in their ears to the hour of doom!"

Suddenly he was interrupted in his work and stopping short, he listened to hear a footstep coming down the corridor along which he had just carried the treasure.

"What if he has followed here?" said Rubio. "What if I am alone in the mine with Dolores Dick?"

He held his breath while he appeared to count the steps in the dense darkness, and when they stopped and a match was struck, he fell back against the wall with a long knife lying along his arm.

Twenty yards away stood the man of whom he had just spoken—Dolores Dick; but he was not alone.

"Ha, those eyes have captured him!" said Rubio.

Near the handsome desperado stood the person called Golden Buck, and the man who glared at the pair from his dark retreat thought the black eyes of the new hand looked brighter than ever.

He saw them move down the floor of the cham-

ber, and halt in front of the inscription on the wall.

"That is it," said Golden Buck. "That is the one they found when the mine was discovered. It has been there a long time. The serpent and arrow which you see carved there are tattooed on Rubio's arm."

"They are there," answered Dick. "I have seen them a thousand times. He refuses to tell who put them there, but I know that they were tattooed for a purpose."

"Yes, that he might come forward as Jose Santado's heir. A cooler villain than Rubio does not exist, and I am surprised that he drew you into his net."

Dolores Dick seemed to start.

"Why did you enter into his scheme?" asked Golden Buck. "Were there no other ranches to plunder—no other mines to take by force?"

There was no reply.

"Did you have to plunder Mesquite?" the same voice continued. "Did you have to drive Mustang Merle from home, and deprive me of shelter? Don't you know there can be no compromise between you and the boy you have evicted?"

"I don't fear that!" cried Dick, spurred into a reply by the last words. "I have hated him for years. I had him in my clutches once when he and Captain Cussed were at war, but I lost him. You can't drive me from Mesquite before I am ready to go. You are a spy; you are all that Rubio charged."

The man watching the pair saw a gleam of merriment shoot up in Golden Buck's eyes, and the slight figure straightened before the Apollo of the border.

"What, did you not suspect anything at the beginning?"

"When you came and asked for a job?"

"Yes."

"As I live, girl, I did not."

"Then you have not the cunning of Rubio. That rascal suspected me from the first, and I knew the moment he asked me if I could write that he had set a trap to catch me."

"But you would not have shot him to-night?"

"He refused to try me very far."

"Rubio knows when to stop. But would you go back to Merle if I were to say 'Go?'"

"Why shouldn't I? You know what I am. You know that I am but a spy in Merle's employ—that I willingly undertook this service to help him redeem the ranch."

"It was a brave act, girl!"

"Mesquite is my home. Here my father died, and here I hope to live all my life."

Dolores Dick's face seemed to get a touch of pity at the low, soft words of the girl spy; but the hand in the dark—the long fingers at knife—only clutched the hilt the harder, and the eyes above it got a deadlier flash.

"If you go I may never see you more," said Dick.

"Ay, but you will!" was the quick answer. "I will come back when he comes."

"What, will the boy rancher fight us all?"

"He will. Do you think he intends to surrender the mine; that he has given Mesquite up to the vultures?"

The bandit of the Southwest laughed, looking into the beautiful face before him.

"You need not go back. You have said that you want to live here—that Mesquite is rendered dear to you by memories of your father. Why not remain?"

"With the ranch in your hands?" cried Golden Buck.

"Yes."

"That would be condoning a theft, and one of the most infamous crimes of this region of misdeeds."

"But you would forget that in time."

"I would never forget that Mesquite was wrested from its true owner by a dark stratagem—that an impostor, aided by a bandit, did the deed."

"Yes," said Dick, sharply, "yes, I am a bandit, but bandits in this region can be gentlemen."

"Prove it, then," said the other, grasping his arm. "Prove it by riding this night from Mesquite, and by quitting the company of the serpent whose cause you have espoused."

"The serpent, eh?" was hissed in the gloom. "I am the serpent whose sting is death. There is but one Rubio and he is here!"

The little torch which Dolores Dick had thrust into a crack in the wall threw its light over him, and the person he had brought to the mine.

"You ask too much," said the bandit. "You would drive my men from a prize which is making them rich. We shall hold it against all

enemies. We shall defend it against Mustang Merle and he shall discover that he cannot recover that which has once passed into the hands of Dolores Dick."

"Then, meet him when he comes!" exclaimed Golden Buck.

"We will. Take this word to him: Say that, though we have spared your life, we are still his enemies, that he shall never again sit under the roof we now hold and that if he is fool enough to try to retake the ranch and its bonanza, the vultures will have a feast that will make their black beaks water."

"Is that your defiance?" cried the desperado's companion. "Is that the message you send to Mustang Merle?"

"That is it."

"Then it goes straight to him."

"To-night?"

"To-night!"

"But what if I refuse to let you go now?" and the hand of Dolores Dick seized the wrist displayed in the light. "What if I say 'no?'"

A quick jerk on the part of the one who heard these words broke the bandit's grip, and the next moment the torch was torn from the wall and went spinning like a rocket through the chamber. It passed so close to Dick's face that he involuntarily dodged and when he recovered he stood in total darkness and heard the sound of flying footsteps which faded out while he listened.

"She knows every nook and cranny of the old mine," said Dick with a light laugh. "She has the eyes of a young owl and the feet of a gazelle. No use to follow her: but I would have held her awhile longer, for prizes like her don't fall into one's hands very often in this country."

At the first spring made by "Golden Buck" the man who had leaned against the wall fell forward and threw out one of his hands.

"If fate brings the spy this way, woe to her!" said he, through his teeth. "I'm itching to pay her back for her words at the house, and I have no mercy if Dick has."

But he waited in vain, for the girl spy did not pass within reach of his talons, and he was forced to withdraw them without any spoil of beauty.

"Oh, it's not for the last time," said he. "She will come back when the boy rancher comes, and then I shall make up for the miss to-night!" and he turned to listen to Dolores Dick's laugh as he passed him in the dark.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CRAWL OF THE SNAKE.

MEANTIME the exiled young rancher of Mesquite had not been idle.

We have seen how he sent Joe Bundy to Tagus to consult with Brad Murphy the captain of the Free Lances of the border, and have witnessed the interview which took place in the gloom of Murphy's hut. Besides this, we have seen how a lasso fell in the starlight on the open when Monte-Play, one of Dolores Dick's friends, was riding back to the ranch with information of the old miner's call on the leader of the freebooters.

The day following the interview in the hut, ten men who looked like desperate fellows rode over the prairie and halted in the heart of a little valley which was almost hidden in a network of hills covered with mesquite and cedar, and as they sprung to the ground a good-looking youth appeared and touched his hat to them.

"Here we ar', accordin' ter orders," said the leader of the band, a tall man who wore a wide-rimmed hat, the band of which was the skin of a rattlesnake. "Thar ar' ten of us—jest the number bargained for as this will tell you," and he handed the boy a letter which was read with some eagerness.

"You are a good-looking lot of men," he said, looking up into the speaker's face.

Some of the men grinned and one espied a young Indian who had come forward and was eying them with the gaze of the eagle.

"That's yer red pard, eh?"

"This is Red Hawk?" answered Merle.

"We've heard of him. Looks like he'd fight."

"Try him," answered the boy rancher, proudly. "He can speak for himself."

In a short time the band who had come from Captain Brad Murphy, made themselves at home, and Merle and the leader were in consultation in the bush.

When night came there was an inspection of saddle-girths, and the whole number rode from the valley, taking a course toward Mesquite. Joe Bundy rode alongside Merle and talked to him in low tones.

"I've looked at 'em all, an' thar's one I don't like," said the old miner.

"But Captain Murphy agreed to vouch for them all, Joe."

"I know that. I don't like the cut of his jib," persisted the miner. "And from what I kin observe, Red Hawk is of the same opinion."

"Which is he?"

"The fellar with the scar over his eye—the one who looked more than he talked to-day."

"I noticed him," said Merle, and just then Red Hawk came up, his naked knee touching the young rancher's leg.

The band were riding behind them, and the Indian leaned toward Merle and whispered:

"One of these men must not go all the way with us, master. He is a spy."

"But they are Free Lances, Red Hawk."

"All but one. I don't care what you think him; he has the eyes of a spy in his head, and is as dangerous as the man I lassoed on the plain."

The little command kept on until they reached a stream, down whose bank they galloped, and all at once the young Apache fell back and vanished. He did not reappear until they were away from the clear creek, and once more on the open, riding toward the ranch.

"Red Hawk has felt the man with the scar," said a voice at Merle's ear. "He has seen the serpent uncoil himself, but he will never whisper to the wolves on the ranch."

Thrilled by the Indian's words, the boy rancher looked back over his shoulder and counted nine men where there had been ten. He said nothing, though his eyes fell and he became thoughtful, and once more Red Hawk left him, and Joe Bundy took his place.

"That red is worth his weight in diamonds," said the old man. "He fell back awhile ago, and at the same time I noticed that one of the new pards war missin'. Presently Red Hawk came up an' touched my hand. I kin read a touch sometimes, even in the dark, and this one lid not deceive me. That's a Free Lance back thar what won't go with us ter Mesquite."

The band now rode down into a basin and halted. Several hours had passed since the start, and the horses had been ridden hard. The rescuers drew rein and came together under the glowing stars.

Beyond the line of hills which lay in their front was the objective point of the expedition. There nestled robbed and plundered Mesquite, and there rioted the men who had taken it by stratagem, boastful of their dastardly success, and ready to meet and sweep back the boy when he should come to retake his own.

While the little band breathe in the valley let us transport ourselves to Mesquite and witness the exciting scenes transpiring there on the eve of others more exciting still.

Seated in the main room of the ranch-house with a paper before him—a paper which threatened to crumble to dust in his hands—was Dolores Dick, the handsome usurper of the border. He was quite alone, but not unwatched.

He had just read the old document which fell from the hands of the skeleton on the shelf of rock in the heart of the mine, and which being found by Red Hawk and Neva, was borne to Mustang Merle. When the ranch was taken this paper, written many years before by the hand which was now a skeleton one, fell into the clutches of the captors, and Dolores Dick had brought it from its hiding-place to read it alone, for he saw, from the glance given it at the time, that it might possess a secret destined to become of vast value to him.

The bandit's face wore a look of triumph. Neva had escaped from him in the mine, and he doubted not had made her way back to Merle with the information she had collected during her sojourn on the ranch.

This did not trouble the bandit very much, for he believed that she would return with the boy rancher and would eventually fall back into his hands, when, some day, he would make her queen of the place where, in her beauty, she had reigned before.

Dolores Dick thought not of a watcher while he sat at the table, much less of the near presence of a long knife which at that very moment was gripped by a dark hand. He had seen during the day some sly glances by the Man with the Marked Arm, but he trusted in the keen eyes of the men whom he had summoned to the feast of captured wealth, and who would brook no insolence from the man called Rubio.

All at once the door behind Dick opened with the noiselessness of a portal swinging on oiled hinges. It moved inch by inch and there crept into the room a man whose eyes told his mission. His feet gave out no sound, and Dick did not see the shadow his figure threw on the floor.

Nearer and nearer to the handsome bandit

came the shadow of fate. The dagger that gleamed along the arm was not seen; it was held back by the cunning hand which gripped it.

Suddenly Dolores Dick was startled from the quietude of the hour. The air rung with a deafening report and he sprung from his seat to see writhing on the floor near the door the figure of Rubio of the Marked Arm.

The sudden change seemed to deprive Dick of speech, and he could but stare at the ruffian who rolled hither and thither in his agony.

The shot which had done the work came from the back window and Dolores Dick now saw for the first time the shattered glass that littered the floor.

All at once he sprung to Rubio and lifted him up.

"You didn't get to do it, eh?" cried Dick with a grin, for he saw that the bullet had shattered the man's arm and that it had rendered him helpless.

There was no answer beyond the sullen look and half-growl that welled from the rascal's throat.

"The knife convicts you," continued Dick, looking down at the dagger which lay in a gout of blood. "You have lost the prize!"

The next moment Dolores Dick went to the door and threw it open. In a second a lot of gaping men armed to the teeth came in and stood around the man on the floor.

"Which of you did that?" asked Dick gazing at the group.

"I did," said one. "I saw the fellow crawling toward the house and thought I would watch the cat. I could have killed him just as well, but I thought you didn't want that."

"I did not," replied Dick. "You have winged the vulture and that is exactly what I wanted. And you have hit him on the arm which bears his brand."

A growl from Rubio announced that this was true.

In another minute the wounded man's coat had been stripped off and the shattered arm was exposed to the gaze of all.

"Look!" cried Dick with another laugh, "your bullet struck the coiled serpent and obliterated it. Dress the wound, Logan. There is some surgeon about you."

The rough men stood round while Rubio's arm was dressed in good shape, and when the work was done Dolores Dick, looking at the Half Comanche, said in a stern voice:

"There is no need of a trial. You have been sentenced already. The attempt to make yourself sole owner of Mustang Merle's mine has condemned you. You will spend the rest of your life in the mine you have coveted. You will make the 'bottomless pit' your abode. Take him away!"

But Rubio drew back with flaming visage and faced Dolores Dick with the mien of a thorough-paced scoundrel.

"To the mine, is it?" he cried. "Then I will die richer than you. I will hug to my heart when the end overtakes me more wealth than you have schemed for. Rubio is not powerless, though you hide him in the heart of Jose Santado's treasure-house. What had I to expect of a pard who lets a spy escape just because she has pretty eyes and pearly teeth? You were eying me like a hawk, wondering how much steel it would take to finish me. Here I am! Take me to the mine. As I have said, I shall be rich there," and with a laugh which seemed to chill the blood of the desperate men who heard, he stepped forward and gave himself into the hands of the bandit's friends.

"This is what one gets for giving a whole loaf to a famished dog!" he finished, and the next moment was hustled from the room.

CHAPTER XV.

MERLE IN THE TOILS.

CREeping through a ravine whose lofty walls seemed to exclude every particle of starlight was a figure which while it looked human, had the shape of a sneaking animal. It was making its way toward the mouth of Mustang Merle's mine and when it reached it and found no sentry there it darted into the place and disappeared.

"This is getting home," said a voice in the gloom which prevailed. "I don't need any light for I know every foot of the old hole and could walk its many corridors without a misstep."

The speaker went on deep and deeper into the mine and at last came to a narrow passage through which he wedged himself to stand erect and expand his lungs in the air that came from some unseen corner.

If a light had been struck where the crawler had halted it would have revealed the form and face of the boy rancher himself. Mustang Merle had come back to his own, but he was alone—a spy in his own mine!

He had come back in advance of the men he had led for a purpose, and for one which could have led him to no other mine than the one in which he stood.

All was darkness around him, and he groped his way on until he reached some queer-shaped objects which his hands felt with satisfaction.

They were the quartz-crushers, huge machines strong enough to break the gold-bearing rock which was taken from the veins, and Merle seemed to chuckle with delight when he ran his hands over them, for the contact told him that he was at "home" at last.

"It is not here that I want to do my work," said he, and he moved on once more, nor stopped again until he stood in a chamber, the ceiling of which he could touch with his hands.

There he struck a light. For the first time since entering the mine he dissipated the darkness, but only in a measure then, for he hid the little light under his coat and crept to a corner where he stooped and listened.

Then the match went out and left him crouched there with a smile on his face, as if he was listening to something that pleased him.

"This is better than crouching at the window and getting a bullet in one's head," said Merle. "They are all there and are having merry times in the old house."

If the men who had swooped down upon Mesquite had used their eyes on every occasion they might have seen the wire which entered the mine at its mouth, a wire which ran along the grimy walls and was so coated with cobwebs that it looked almost like a cord. This wire terminated at the foot of the wall of the low-ceiled chamber and where Merle had crouched and was listening to the sound of voices which came over it from the boisterous crowd assembled in the house.

"Neva said the wire was all right when she joined us," said he, "and so it is. I can hear them distinctly, and above all rises the voice of my old friend, Dolores Dick."

Merle kept his ear glued to the most modern invention connected with his mine, his secret telephone, the existence of which had not been divulged to the men who had served him until they took the oath of parole not to fight against Dick and Rubio; and now it was serving him in an emergency which he had hoped would never come.

He heard the various voices of the men at the house; he heard the breaking of bottles and knew that the wine which he had stored in the cellars of the ranch for the tastes of his visitors, was being spilled for the plunderers of the border.

But all of a sudden the noises grew still.

"Hello, who are you?" shouted the voice of Dolores Dick.

"Some one has come in," said Merle. "The bandit has a visitor and, from the voice, an unexpected one."

"Who am I?" was the reply. "Whar I hold forth I am called Black Dave an' I roam the prairies helpin' people when they're in danger."

"But there's none here, so sit down, Black Dave, an' break a bottle of the young rancher's best vintage with us."

"No danger, eh?" laughed the strange voice which Merle had heard. "Wait till you've heard from me."

What would the boy rancher not have given if he could have seen the tableau which he could imagine from the words that came over the hidden wire? What if he could have looked into the banquet room and seen the tall, spurred man who had entered uninvited and who looked just like a messenger of warning as he stood erect with his pants stuck in his boots and the dust of the prairie trail on his leggings?

"Tell us, then," said the voice of Dolores Dick. "If you have news and want to impart it, you may."

"Then, you are in danger. In the valley across the creek lurks the enemy. Haven't I followed him mile on mile? Didn't I see something in Tagus that excited my suspicion, and when the tall old Yank dropped in quietly and asked for Captain Murphy, wasn't I quick ter think that something war afoot?"

The men looked at one another and then at the cool man who was listening to the speaker without a sign of excitement.

Ah, if Merle, ready to abandon the telephone, could have seen this!

"We did not think of this betraver," said he. "I was not aware that Black Dave was

in the country, or we might have been on the lookout for him, for I've known the rascal these two years. And now he has betrayed us to the mine-grabbers; he has put them on their guard and my boys must know it. What if Dick takes the initiative and comes out to meet us? He must be forestalled!"

The young ranch king sprung up and turned from the wire. He had heard enough, and he blessed the good fortune which had brought him to the low-ceiled room in the nick of time.

Eagerness lent speed to his limbs now. He ran from one chamber into another, and was threading it as rapidly as though he had the light of day to guide him.

But something suddenly seized him in the dark. It seemed to twine about him like a snake, but he knew that it was a human arm, and when he went to the wall, trying to break loose, he felt a hot breath on his cheek and heard an ejaculation of victory.

Merle, though strong, was in the grip of some one stronger still. He was pushed against the wall where he was held despite his struggles, and with the hand at his throat—there seemed to be but one which his antagonist was using—he could hardly breathe.

"What have I caught?" he heard a voice laugh. "It seems to be a little rat, but they are dangerous sometimes."

There was something terribly familiar in the tones which assailed the boy rancher's ears. He had heard them before, but where?

Merle kept up the struggle which only seemed to hasten the end, for the grip now became unendurable, and he found that he was being dragged down the corridor and could not resist, for the hand had choked him almost insensible.

"Is there a maniac in the mine?" the boy asked himself, while he was being pulled over the rough floor. "What devilish guard has Dolores Dick set over my treasure? This hand—why is it I have felt but the one?—seems to sink into my throat and I can not recover my strength."

He was soon to have the whole mystery solved, for the rough journey over the stones came to an abrupt conclusion, and he fell back, but was not released.

After an interval of a minute a match blazed up in his face, and the moment his eyes became accustomed to the glare he beheld a form which drove a chill to his heart.

The laughing eyes, the dark skin, the grinning mouth told him that he had, falling into the hands of Rubio, the Man with the Marked Arm!

But the arm which seemed to be useless? What had happened to it?

"You have come back, have you?" said the man, looking down into Mustang Merle's face without a single expression of pity. "I was not expecting you, but all is fish that comes to Rubio's net now! Oh, I'm a winged hawk for the present, but I have my talons yet, and they are sharp. Who did it for me? Ask the man I have led to riches; ask the cool bandit who, but for me, would now be a grinning skeleton on the desert. I was trying to pay him back for letting your girl spy go; but the man who watched outside sent a ball through my arm, destroying my title to Jose Santado's mine, and here we are—you my prisoner and I consigned to death in the depths of the bonanza!"

The man ceased and drawing back, looked at Merle whose countenance showed that he had not yet recovered from the unexpected encounter.

"This is no place to stop," suddenly continued Rubio, his hand sinking into his young captive's shoulder. "I want to show you something which I don't think you ever found despite all you knew of the old treasure-house."

Rubio, who had the strength of a giant, started off again and the boy rancher, who would have broken from him if he could, for he was anxious to carry Black Dave's warning to the friends he had left outside the mine, was compelled to follow.

In a short time Rubio drew up again and Merle knew that he was in the last and deepest chamber of the bonanza. The sound of their voices told him where they were.

"What would you give to get out?" asked Rubio, putting his face so close to Merle's in the dark that he seemed to see the eyes snap.

The heart of the young ranch king gave a great leap for joy.

"But why do I ask you?" cried the Marked Arm before he could be answered. "You are a beggar! The mine is yours no longer. It fell into our hands and he who thinks he holds it now, would not ransom you."

That was true, but a sudden thought filled Merle's brain.

"You say he sentenced you to death here, Captain Rubio?" he said. "You have an arm which will never again do you any service. It was lucky it was not your head."

Teeth grated in the dark.

"I am here in force. I have come for the re-taking of Mesquite. I have just heard that Dolores Dick and his men have been warned. If they win, you perish; if I gain the battle—"

"Rubio will hang, ha! ha!" laughed the Marked Arm. "No, you can't hoodwink Captain Rubio, Merle."

Merle's heart seemed to sink within him, and for a moment he regarded everything as lost.

CHAPTER XVI.

JOE BUNDY ON DECK.

It was terribly true that a warning had reached Dolores Dick from an unexpected quarter. Black Dave was one of the best known men in the Southwest, but none expected to see him invade the banquet hall and announce that Mesquite Merle and his allies were near and ready to fall upon the mine-grabbers in a desperate fight for his own.

Of course the boy listening to the warning at the underground telephone could not see the excitement caused by Black Dave's warning, but he could guess it from the exclamations that greeted it. He doubted not that Dolores Dick would at once seek to prepare for the attack, but instead he invited the messenger to a seat at the table and in a short time seemed to forget the story he had told.

Meantime the young rancher was still in the grip of the man who had seized him in the depths of the mine.

Rubio was delighted with his capture and when Merle told him that if Dick gained the contest soon to be decided he (Rubio) would have to perish, he laughed and asked the boy if his triumph did not mean the same fate.

"No, Captain Merle, Rubio is no fool," pursued the Man with the Marked Arm. "I have lived too long to be hoodwinked by a boy. I have played for the wealth we have about us at this moment, and I can't afford to let a prize like you slip through my hands."

The situation of the boy rancher was desperate indeed. What if the wolves of the ranch should abandon the banquet board and go out to surprise the brave men he had led back over the prairie and lofty hills?

"Come, I have not shown you all," suddenly said Rubio. "You have never seen the treasure-house of Jose Santado, my illustrious ancestor. We will visit it now."

Once more Merle was being dragged over the rough floor of the old bonanza with the hand of the madman at his arm. The journey seemed endless, but it terminated at last when Rubio halted and told Merle to clamber over the edge of a yawning pit from which the young rancher shrank with a chill of terror.

"It is down there, the wealth of the old man!" laughed Rubio. "Joe Bundy may have told you something about it for he was there when he escaped from me, but I want you to see it, Merle."

Forced to descend the rope ladder which hung along the wall, Merle went down, with the Marked Arm coming down after him.

"Now look about you," said Rubio, striking a match and lighting a little torch which he knew where to find in the wall. "Here is the gold you knew nothing about. I found it long ago."

"Then you have been here while the mine was in my possession?"

The man looked at Merle and laughed.

"Why shouldn't I come and look at what was mine?" he said. "I have been here a hundred times and you knew it not."

"Then is when you stole and transferred to your arm the mark which the bullet spoiled?"

There was no answer to this, for Rubio was waving his good arm at some bags in one corner of the place, and Merle, for the moment forgetting his situation, went forward and stooped over them. They were buckskin sacks, but time had rendered them useless, and when he touched one it fell to pieces.

The next moment there rolled over his foot a number of dark, yellow things, round in shape, and having the rude stamp of money. When he picked up one he found that one side was stamped with the same device he had seen in the wall—the coiled serpent and the broken arrow, proving that Jose Santado had had a mint of his own, an underground mint, where he had coined the money which he had never circulated.

Merle looked awhile, closely watched by the man who had brought him to the spot, and when he turned to Rubio, the eyes of that character were ablaze.

"Ain't it worth playing for?" he grinned.

"There is much wealth here," answered the young rancher. "But if you are to end your days in the mine, what good will it ever do you?"

"But can't I go?" cried Rubio. "Am I not free, and have I not one good arm? Dolores Dick forgot that I came here long before there was any plot between us for Mesquite. I am in for the whole game and Rubio has played for many and never lost a single prize."

The desperado now fell back, and when Merle saw him throw a swift look toward the rope, he sprung toward it, but was seized by the long hand and thrown rudely against the wall. There, half-stunned, he fell at the foot of the gray stone and saw but indistinctly a man flit up the ladder, dropping the torch when he was a few feet from the ground.

"Don't follow me, boy!" came down the swaying rope, and the voice was so stern that Merle dropped it and recoiled.

He knew the full meaning of those words. To attempt to follow the villain meant that he would be shaken off without mercy, and that a fall to the floor would prove fatal and end his career in the treasure-house of Jose Santado.

Rubio disappeared, and the prisoner of the old place stood and listened to the last sounds of his going. What would happen now? When would Dolores Dick and his men throw themselves upon Red Hawk and Joe Bundy, with the brave spirits who were waiting for his return in the ravine near the ranch? And when all was over who would ever find him in the depths of the bonanza?

The ladder had been pulled up by the fleeing Rubio, and there seemed no escape for the young rancher of the border.

Merle paced the floor of his prison and tried to devise some way out of the impossible. If he shouted, who would come to his rescue?

"I must wait the issue of the battle," said he at last. "If my boys are defeated, then I will perish here. But I wanted to lead them. I wanted to head them in the last charge for Mesquite; but here I am cooped up like a serpent, and I can't crawl through the bars of the cage. Must it be thus? Oh, that Red Hawk or Old Joe knew that I have been caught by a lurking wolf!"

Rubio had gone back to the front chambers of the mine. The place to which he had been consigned by Dolores Dick's orders had failed to hold him for he knew the bonanza better than his pard and he had managed to slip from the cage and was on the watch for his old co-plotter when Merle fell into his hands.

He went to the very mouth of the mine and stood again under the stars.

All at once there came to his ears the sound of voices and then the peculiar noise which told him that horses were being saddled.

"That means something," said Rubio.

He slipped across the space in front of the mine's mouth and hugging the wall of the gulch glided toward the opening not far off. The sounds he heard had grown still, but he saw a light moving where the house stood and knew that he who carried it was a follower of Dolores Dick's fortunes.

But all this time there was creeping upon the man on the watch a foe whose approach he did not hear. It had the motions of the gliding panther, and if Rubio had seen it he would not have listened with his face toward Mesquite a moment longer.

All at once when near him the crawler rose and sprung straight at the Marked Arm.

Rubio turned, but it was too late; a pair of long arms were fastened round his throat and he was in their coils.

"Bless me if I haven't caught the Old Harry himself!" said a voice at the ears of the breathless Rubio. "This is a prize worth pickin' up, but I don't think I ought to be lenient jest because you war the means o' my gettin' out o' the treasure-house some time ago."

The last sentence ended in a laugh and Rubio knew into whose power he had fallen.

Joe Bundy had stolen a march on him despite his cleverness, and he was fairly caught by a man who would show him no mercy.

"Come back inter the mine," said Old Joe. "I don't want ter get a squint of yer face by match-light for I know how it looks without that trouble. I have caught you squarely, Rubio, an' thar's a big account ter settle when the time comes."

Rubio drew back as far as his captor would

let him and Joe saw a wicked gleam in the rascal's eye.

He was closely watched and held by the old miner's big hand until they stood in the darkness of the mine, when Old Joe said:

"I'm seein' how the land lies, Rubio, an' I don't want ter be troubled with a prisoner. So I'll jest leave you here while I proceed with the business in hand."

A thrill of joy stirred the sluggish blood in the veins of the little man. To be left in the mine—he did not care where—meant liberty!

Old Joe now struck a light and led Rubio from one chamber to another, and when he stopped the prisoner uttered a cry of terror.

"What are you going to do with me?" he exclaimed.

"I thought I'd leave you whar you couldn't get away until I was through with the little spyin' job I have on hand jest now."

"But below us is the treasure-house!" cried Rubio. "You know how deep it is."

"Didn't I fall into it myself once?" was the retort. "If I warn't killed by my tumble, why should you be by yours?"

Horror seemed to still Rubio's tongue.

"I can't waste time," said Joe. "Come, get over the edge of the wall here an' drop."

"No, anything but that!" gasped the Marked Arm.

The next moment there came up from below a voice that startled Joe Bundy and the prisoner nearly slipped from his grasp.

"Jericho, that sounds like the young master!" he cried.

"It is I, Joe, and the villain in your grip is the cause of my incarceration here."

"Is that true Captain Rubio?"

There was no answer.

"He brought me down here on a ladder of rope and left me to perish in this pit."

The voice was still sounding when Rubio went against the nearest wall with a heavy thud.

"That rope, you p'izen sarpint, or down you go head foremost!" cried the last of the Bundys.

Rubio looked at Joe Bundy with the glare of a fiend.

"The rope I say, you miserable reptile," cried the old man. "You will produce it at once or proceed ter tumble. Thar's no feather-bed down thar as you'll discover on stopping. Be lively and get a rope, please."

Growling the curses he dared not speak, the Marked Arm walked off, watched by Bundy who kept at his heels and in a short time the long rope was found.

As the ladder dropped into the darkness it was hailed with delight by a boy and presently nimble feet were climbing up.

"Here I am, Joe!" cried Merle, appearing at the top of the wall, and the rough hand of the last of the Bundys seized him with a hearty grasp.

Rubio looked on with the darkest of frowns. He seemed to know that the boy's escape marked his own doom.

"Well, Captain Rubio, it's your turn to go down," said Old Joe turning suddenly upon the villain.

There was no move on the fellow's part, but the eyes that regarded Joe and Merle told the thoughts at that time filling the marked bandit's mind.

All at once a bright idea took possession of Rubio. In another moment he had thrown himself upon Bundy and to Merle's horror both were struggling on the very verge of the pit.

Despite his wounded arm Rubio seemed possessed of the strength of a Hercules. He bore the figure of the old scout to the fringe of the yawning chasm and seemed about to throw him down.

The breaths of the combatants came fast and they fought like gladiators in the light of the torch stuck into the wall.

Suddenly Mustang Merle took a hand in the battle for he saw a chance to help his old friend and in a second had sprung forward and was doing so.

Old Joe was helped by the boy rancher in the nick of time, for when Merle threw himself into the combat his breath and strength were nearly gone and the hand of Rubio was about to hurl him into the dark depths of the treasure-house.

Merle's appearance in the fight turned the scale, for Rubio was taken at a disadvantage and Joe found himself free from the terrible grip.

"I guess you'll go down yer ladder after all," said he to Rubio. "You'll find gold enough down thar to make you a nabob the rest of yer life. Don't give any of it away, Rubio!" and the grin that came to the old man's face darkened the look in the rascal's eyes.

A minute after the figure of a man climbed down the rope-ladder and vanished.

"That bird is safe," said Old Joe. "Some things take place in the nick of time, don't they? ha, ha," and seizing Merle's wrist, Joe Bundy turned and almost ran toward the mouth of the mine.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BLOW FALLS.

IF Rubio of the Marked Arm had known the true cause of the sudden ending of the sounds which indicated that horses were being saddled he would have smiled.

The reader remembers how Black Dave burst in upon the banqueters and told them that Merle and his allies were about to fall upon the plunderers of the ranch, and how he was asked to join in the feast.

The rolling stone of the border seemed to forget his mission in the flow of Merle's wine, and ere long he was as merry as the merriest around the board.

At last Dolores Dick remembered the message of the Tagus tough, and said that the horses would be saddled to carry them to the valley where they would fall upon the rescuers and finish the battle in a manner not to their liking.

The men rose sluggishly from the table; some did not want to go at all, and were inclined to laugh at Black Dave's warning, and even intimated that it was a story coined for the purpose of getting a good supper. But the horses were taken from the stable and were being saddled when it was discovered that Black Dave had slipped away.

A smile overspread Dolores Dick's face when he was told that the man was not to be found.

"It was a trick after all," said he. "Take back the horses. The scamp, passing the ranch and seeing us enjoying ourselves, concluded to get a glass of Merle's best for nothing, and now that he has had it has slipped off before his game could be found out."

Thus the steeds were taken to the stables, and the whole crew returned to the house, where they laughed over the "trick" played by the clever Dave.

In a little time the banquet was resumed, and it is doubtful if a warning in any shape would have had the least effect upon the revelers.

Suddenly some one proposed that Rubio should be brought before them all, and tried for his dastardly attempt on Dick's life.

"Bring him up!" cried Dolores Dick. "Let's have the Man with the Marked Arm here to drink some of Mustang Merle's wine, for he led us to it, and should share the feast."

Rio Rube, a giant in stature, agreed to go to the mine and find the prisoner, and left the house.

Among the trees, and deep in the dark shadows they threw on the lawn, crouched a figure which the eyes of the half-intoxicated man did not see. He walked toward it, and when within a foot of where it crouched it sprang up, and Rio Rube went back like a man struck with a club. The big bandit dropped under a tree and lay still. There had been no sound, and the blow that had stretched him on the ground had not been misdirected.

Dolores Dick and his companions waited for Rube's return. They wondered what kept the messenger to the mine, and when the handsome bandit proposed to go himself, there was a general objection, and Dick was forced back into his chair.

Down in the heart of the mine stood a man who had just fallen from a height of twenty feet, and in his hands were the remains of a rope ladder.

Joe Bundy had forced Rubio, against his will, of course, to reveal the hiding-place of the ladder by which he had descended into the treasure-house, and when it had been lowered for Merle, who had come up from the darkness below, he, (Rubio) had been forced to go down, and now he stood in the pit himself, with no way out, for the hand of Bundy had severed the rope, and the ladder had fallen upon his head.

"When we let that man get away we ruined the whole game," said Rubio. "Old Joe Bundy is the worst of the lot. He knows no mercy, and is as cool as a cucumber. I'm back in the treasure-house, and it looks as if I might end my days in the dark. Well, there's one consolation, though it's not a very pleasant one under the circumstances—I'll die rich!" And he kicked aside in disgust some of Jose Santado's wealth which had rolled to his feet.

To perish there was a pang to Rubio. He had plotted for one of the best mines in all that country, had feasted on the thought of becoming

owner of Mesquite Ranch, but the dream had been broken, and he was the tenant of the old treasure-house where, from present indications, he would end his days, with wealth on every side.

Vainly did he tramp from wall to wall, like a tiger in his cage. Vain, too, were the strokes he inflicted with his one good arm; they fell powerless on the cold stone, and he had to fall back, gnashing his teeth and thinking of the triumph of the man whom he had brought to the treasure, to become that man's prisoner, and to see the gold of Santado slip through his dirty fingers.

Joe and Merle had gone back. The young rancher, rescued by the old faithful, had told him all about the message of the telephone in the dark, and to ascertain whether the bandits were still holding carnival at the house, he guided Joe to the corner, and the old miner listened with a smile at his mouth.

"They're thar yet, Merle, boy," said he. "I kin hear the head rascal of 'em all telling how much they will get at the first divide. They don't oversize the pile any, for they don't know how much the mine is worth. Thar goes another song. By Jericho! let's break up this feast."

Out into the starlight ran the twain, and down the ravine toward the valley where the Free Lances waited.

There they were joined by Red Hawk, who had been near the house, and a girl came forward and asked anxiously after Dolores Dick. It was Neva, and there was a gleam of merriment in her dark eyes.

"He would have kept me in his own hands, and perhaps have made me Queen of Mesquite," laughed the girl. "But I escaped from the mine to which he took me to tell me his plans out of reach of Rubio's ears, and when he recovered, I was far off, running to you."

"Well, we are going back now, Neva," was the reply. "We have come for our own once more, and the men who have plundered the ranch are about to see their scheme come to naught."

Half an hour later a line of dark figures crept across the little open near the ranch buildings, and past the stables where the steeds of the bandits stood unsaddled once more.

Not a word was spoken, and the avengers of Mesquite crept nearer and nearer until the eye of young Red Hawk was at the window, and his lithe body crouched on the porch.

What did the Apache see?

Before him was the room where the banqueters sat with their faces flushed and their hands pouring the wine of the rich ranch. The Indian looked and grinned.

"The white vultures think not of the wolves that have come," said he, as he crept back, and then glided across the lawn, passing a man who lay under one of the trees, the one who had started to bring Rubio out of the mine for trial, and looking down at the silent form Red Hawk nodded, for he knew how Rio Rube had met his fate.

"Come," said he, appearing suddenly to Mustang Merle who, with Joe Bundy and the others, crouched in the dark and waited for him. "Red Hawk has seen the vultures, and they have reddened their beaks with the vintage of the ranch."

In the house, with the lamps of the ranch throwing their brilliant light upon the hilarious scene, stood the men of the border around the table which they were about to desert.

The banquet had reached an ending at last.

"Come, boys," cried the flushed and good-looking man at the head of the table, whose black hair fell round his broad shoulders. "We will toast our absent friends. Here's to Mustang Merle, the young exile! When he comes back to Mesquite may he find us here to greet him with a bandit's welcome, and if the beauty comes with him, may she bring sunshine to the old ranch!"

There were loud shouts at this and the laughing men, throwing up there goblets, were responding to the toast when the door flew wide and a voice shouted:

"Mustang Merle is here!"

In an instant the scene changed and the bandits of the border fell back and stared at the young person who stood at the threshold with a six-shooter in each hand.

Yes, Mustang Merle, the boy ranch king, had come back.

Dolores Dick looked at the apparition and dashed his glass to the table.

It did not take him a second to recognize the speaker.

"Hands down, gentlemen!" continued Merle. "I have not come after my own alone. Here

are my friends, Red Hawk and Captain Bundy—"

"The last, o' the Bundys, too!" interrupted a voice over the boy's shoulder.

"We have come for justice and vengeance, and the first of you to resist will drop in his tracks dead!"

Almost sobered by the young rancher's words, the bandits withdrew their hands from the half-drawn weapons and the following moment the room was swarming with friends and foes.

The Free Lances came in at Merle's heels and the tall and uncouth figure of Joe Bundy was among the most prominent.

"There has been a double play here," cried Dolores Dick when he had recovered his tongue. "We were betrayed By Black Dave. The rascal was in your employ, Mustang Merle."

"Not in my pay," was the quick response. "I never hired the rascal to serve me. You lost the game when you failed to follow his advice. I was then a prisoner in the old treasure-house and could not warn my friends. Yes, Captain Dick, when you did not obey Black Dave the prize slipped through your fingers."

The prisoners were secured, which was not a very difficult task, for they were covered by the Winchesters of the Free Lances, and when this had been accomplished, Dolores Dick turned upon the boy rancher.

"If you take a single life, the vengeance that will be taken will sweep you from the face of the earth and sow Mesquite in salt!" he cried.

There was a smile at the lips of the boy rancher and he turned away.

"I am in the toils, but there is a way out," muttered Dick. "I have never been caged long and fortune always comes back to me," and he returned with interest the look he received just then from Red Hawk, the Apache.

CHAPTER XVIII.

VICTORY AND PEACE.

"I HAVE no great cause against these men of Dick's," said Mustang Merle to Joe Bundy, when he had looked upon the prisoners of the ranch. "They are Free Lances, and are ready to fight wherever there is spoil. They are human vultures, I know, but they would not avenge the death of their last master."

"But Dolores Dick himself?" queried Old Joe. "We shall try him to-morrow."

Morning came, and there assembled in the banquet chamber the victors of the previous night. Dolores Dick had been conducted to the mine where he was placed in a certain room with the trustiest members of the Free Lances over him. He was to be tried for his acts, and Merle had organized a court for that purpose.

Joe Bundy had been made high sheriff of the court, and, at a signal from Merle, went down to the mine for the prisoner.

Twenty minutes elapsed, but the old miner did not come back. Red Hawk, watching the door like a lynx, grew nervous, and at last sprung up and rushed from the house. Tightening his belt, the young Indian flew across the open and down the ravine. He did not halt a moment at the door of the bonanza, but plunged in and vanished.

The feet of the young Apache made no noise on the floor of the mine, and he did not stop until he had reached a spot where he knew the men of the border had been stationed to watch their helpless prisoner.

But the place was empty!

Red Hawk looked around and saw neither guards nor captive.

"The Free Lances have gone over to Captain Dick," he cried. "They have fled with the vulture of the South, and he will take them back to other scenes of pillage. Why didn't Red Hawk watch, last night? He was tired for the long watch, for the hour of victory rendered his eyes heavy, and Captain Murphy's men swore to help Merle to the very end of the fight."

In another moment the Indian was outside and going back toward the stables.

"Something is wrong!" cried Merle, springing to the door and then bounding forward to meet the Apache.

"The vulture has soared and Joe is missing!" was all the Indian said, and turning to the stables he disappeared, to come out the next second with his own horse eager to be off.

"When Red Hawk comes back the trail will be found and the captain of the bandits will know that he has been discovered."

These were the words the surprised men who looked on heard as the Indian gave his horse the signal that sent him forward like an arrow, and they watched Red Hawk out of sight.

By-and-by there came out of the mine an object that looked but little like Joe Bundy, yet it was the old miner himself.

"I must have dropped half way ter China," said he, with a comical leer on his leathery face, though it was plain that he was suffering, for he staggered over the ground as he came forward. "I found Dick and his rascally guards comin' out o' the mine as I went in, an' I war taken back an' dropped as Dick directed. It wasn't inter the treasure-house this time, but inter the water-hole which we never explored, and the current swept me on and on until it threw me out, like Jonah's whale, an' here is the last o' the Bundys, a little disfiggered but still in the ring."

At this juncture Neva came forward and Old Joe's bruises were dressed while he listened to the story of Dolores Dick's flight, as it was known to those who told it.

"The Injun will find him," said Joe confidently. "He kin find anything, an' when we know what has become o' Dick, we'll carry the war into Africa."

"Ay, that we will!" said Merle whose eyes were bright with sudden flashes. "But we are back on the old ranch and without the loss of a single worthy life!"

Over the darkened landscape rode the survivors of the last raid on Mesquite.

Few words were spoken, and several forms hung wounded from the saddles.

All at once certain sounds brought the raiders to a halt, and they waited with their hands on their weapons while the tramp of steeds came over the plain.

"I know that voice," said one of the men. "It is the captain."

"Impossible. Merle has finished him ere this."

"But it is him, I tell you," and in a little while a number of horsemen rode up.

"The captain! the captain!" cried several, and Dolores Dick lifted his feathered hat to his men.

It did not take long for the raider chief to tell how the Free Lances, set to watch him by Mustang Merle, had been won over to his cause, and how they had rescued him from the old mine.

Brad Murphy's men did not care whom they served as long as there was any gold in the serving, and some of them had deserted Merle for a man more to their liking, the bandit of the Southwest.

"This is not the last of the old feud," said Dolores Dick, addressing the remnant of his band. "There will be another and more successful battle. The ranch is rich enough to tempt a king."

"It is too rich for that boy to own," was the response.

"Then you are with me yet?"

A cheer was the answer.

Dolores Dick was still unconquered and he led the men away over the plain.

"We must not go too far with these men," he suddenly whispered to one of his own followers, as he nodded toward the Free Lances. "They helped to wipe us out and they may take us back to Tagus and finally turn against us again."

"How many are there of them?"

"Ten."

"The sooner we are rid of the vultures the better. Brad Murphy himself must be paid back for selling his men to Mustang Merle and we might cancel the debt here."

Soon after the whole band entered a dark defile beyond the plain and word was passed quietly through the ranks of Dolores Dick's survivors.

All at once the bandits fell upon the Free Lances and a terrific struggle took place under the stars.

The Free Lances, though taken unawares made a desperate resistance; they fought like tigers against the man whom they had lately rescued from deserved death, but the strength of the bandits was too much for them.

Man after man rolled from the saddle, and when Dick and his men came to count the victims of the attack they found that there was not a Free Lance left to tell the story of the dastardly onslaught.

"We owe no man a debt of gratitude from this moment," cried the captain of the freebooters of the plains. "Now hats in air and a cheer for the free rovers of the border!"

The men, some of whom were bleeding from fresh wounds, obeyed and a wild cheer ascended to the stars.

The following day the old camp was reached, but a sorry sight the bandits cut as they dismounted among scenes of other days.

Dolores Dick sat apart with folded arms and

seemed to contemplate their surroundings with sullen rage.

"We will recruit across the border," said he under his breath. "I have a score to settle with Mustang Merle, the young Ajax of the Southwest. I want to pay back some old debts held against Joe Bundy and the young red-skin. Days, months may elapse before I am ready to strike the blow, but it will fall. I am Dolores Dick, the man who never forgets. I served under Captain Cussed and learned some cunning at his hands. The richest ranch of the Southwest shall yet be mine and I will see how much gold that famous mine turns out. Celebrate your victory while you can, Captain Merle. I live to cut your plumes!"

The look of Dolores Dick was the look of the eagle and when he rode away, leaving his men in camp, there was a smile at the corners of his handsome lips.

He was thinking how he had bribed the Free Lancers and escaped the defenders of Mesquite Ranch.

Night was fading before the advancing day a week after the events just recorded when a jaded horse carrying a young Indian whose eye had lost none of its eagle light, came over the hills in front of the ranch and the tall man who happened to be among the stables, stopped and stared.

"I said he would come!" he cried. "That's the best young chap that ever wore a red skin!" and he ran back to the ranch to be met by Merle on the porch and the two gazed at the person who came forward.

Red Hawk had come back and soon stood among his friends.

"The vulture is across the border," said he. "Red Hawk followed Dolores Dick to his retreat and even tried to capture him, but he would not venture into the trap Red Hawk set."

"Let him go," said Merle with a smile. "We have recovered the mine and, besides, have found Jose Santado's treasure-house. In the old place we found the real cause of all our troubles, Rubio of the Marked Arm. The coward had killed himself in the dark. We let the men of the border go on their parole; they swore never again to play a single card against Mesquite."

"Does Joe think they will not break their word?" asked Red Hawk.

"I don't like the pizen sarpiants nobow," was the answer. "I made the oath as bindin' as I could and they took it willingly. But we're back on the ranch and to-morrow we're goin' ter celebrate the home-comin' with a weddin'."

Just then there was a sudden withdrawal from the little group and the keen eyes of the young Indian saw Neva, with a quick look at Merle, slipping off, her pretty face covered with mantling blushes.

The mine proved richer from that time. The discovery of the long-lost treasure-house, of its original possessor, with the true deciphering of the old document which had fallen from the skeleton fingers, showed the owner of Mesquite more wealth than ever and the new men whom he hired in place of those who took the oath of parole the night Dolores Dick and Rubio captured the ranch by their cunning stratagem, remained true to him, and in other scenes which came to pass showed that they were not cowards.

Joe Bundy recovered from the effects of his last adventure and said that the "last of the Bundys," was as tough as a pine knot, and he and Red Hawk looked frequently after the affairs of the ranch by watching the border for the man who had fled across it with his game played out and he the loser.

Mesquite was too rich a prize for the human vultures of the Southwest to leave very long unmolested, but it had a lot of heroic defenders and Old Joe said time and again to Merle that, with the friends he had, he could "whip the world, to say nothing of the bandits of the border."

Here we once more take leave of Mustang Merle, the young ranch king of the South; we leave him in peace and prosperity, but promise the reader who has followed his varying fortunes, that he has not seen the last of him and his two allies, Red Hawk, the cunning and valiant, and "the last of the Bundys."

THE END.

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